

How the NHS (and nursing) have changed through my career

My NHS career began 35 years ago in September 1988. I started work as a nursing auxiliary with a view to applying for nurse training. At the time nurses didn't take blood or cannulate. Patients could wait five years or more for a joint replacement. Day case was rare and the average length of stay post operatively could be measured in days sometimes weeks.

Although my training didn't include PTS it did follow the pattern that will be familiar to many members. Time spent in the Princess Alexandra College of Nursing interspersed with time spent on the wards at Whitechapel and Mile End. In addition we spent time out with the community teams including the midwives, health visitors and district nurses. Although the East End was gradually changing there was still abject poverty-poor housing, overcrowding and the poor health associated with this. It was a stark reminder of what some patients were being discharged home to.

By the time I qualified in 1993 times were changing in nursing, medicine, and the NHS. The first intake of Project 2000 students had started in autumn 1992. The importance of pre-hospital care for trauma patients had been recognised and HEMS had been established. The career opportunities for nurses were expanding. Nurse specialists such as McMillan were becoming more commonplace. And as time has gone on the role of the nurses has continued to expand. Nurse Consultants, nurse prescribers and nurse led clinics are now seen as the 'norm.'

Just before the pandemic hit wait times for routine surgery were the lowest, they had ever been. Many surgical procedures are now undertaken as laparoscopic 'keyhole' surgery and as a result patients are often only day cases or overnight stays. Even patients undergoing joint replacements can expect to only spend a few days in hospital. However the NHS was and continues to be under pressure-funding constraints, staffing shortages and an ageing population.

When the pandemic hit the NHS did what it always does - rose to the challenge. Nurses quickly adapted, learning new skills, working in unfamiliar clinical settings with others including me moving from non-clinical to clinical work again. The vaccination programme gave us all a glimmer of hope with nurses and other volunteers leading the way.

From 1948 to the present day the NHS has seen many changes and faced many challenges. However it remains the envy of the world and free at the point of delivery.

Happy birthday NHS at 75.