

16th August 1976 – Set 443 – Reflections of a Male Student Nurse aged 19½ Years!

As the NHS celebrates 75 years, I briefly reflect on my own training in the late 1970s at The Princess Alexandra School of Nursing, Whitechapel. It is something I remember well with affection and like others often reminisce how special and rewarding it was to train as a 'LH' nurse, a journey that not only served me well for my long career in the NHS, but also for my time at the UKCC/NMC and for the voluntary work I did with St. John Ambulance, along with family life (caring for a sick child, supporting friends during challenging illnesses).

Joining a set of sixty plus student nurses, all preparing to become SRNs was slightly daunting in terms of the numbers and in that men were in the minority (recalling there were 4 males at the start and 3 of us eventually qualified), saying that as a set we quickly bonded, and many lifelong friends were made not only from Set 443 but with many other students. Over the years I have met and worked with various former 'LH' nurses in a range health care settings, and there is a unique affinity – an 'LH' bond of shared experience.

For someone who had worked for two years prior to starting at 'LH' as an Air Charter Broker on the Baltic Exchange in the centre of the City of London I was suddenly in an a very 'controlled' environment. We were all required to live in for our first year, had certain rules around what 'homes' we could be in after 22.00 hrs, restrictions on visitors and rules around what dining rooms could be. This was overlaid by various 'LH' traditions which you quickly learned and respected - prayers were still said at the morning handover on some wards. Living in 'Cavell' we had an excellent Home Warden who would always have a hot milky drink ready for you after night duty and would also put your room heater on during the winter months.

All male student nurse were provided with a made to measure charcoal grey suits to wear to and from work, short sleeved long white coats to wear in clinical areas, our shirts had to be white, or a neutral colour always worn with a tie. We also received a pensionable salary, my net pay after my first month was £80.36! At the time I did not realise the value of the NHS pension but having retired recently am very appreciative I paid in from day one.

From our first ward we engaged in direct patient care, always being encouraged to do something new in a safe way which enabled you to build your confidence in nursing patients in all sorts of situations, but importantly always ensuring your basic nursing care was optimal – *LH Nursing Notes* played a key role in 'directing' this. The 'rota leader' role held by 3rd year student on wards would often provide an inspiring role-model for junior students, the role was a mixture of mentor, coach, and a shoulder when things were difficult.

I enjoyed all aspects of my student training both the in-school sessions (which were a balance of theory and practical learning) and the hospital & community placements. I also remember various Nursing Officers, Sisters and Charge Nurses who influenced me during my training – they were unique individuals with high professional standards who often had great senses of humour, they embodied the 'LH' *esprit de corps*.

Working in Whitechapel and the surrounding area was a privilege – caring for different members of the community, some in very poor conditions, some with challenging family and social situations, some living a country that was not their 'home' (they were refugees of war or tyrant regimes). It is fair to say many patients were also proud of their local hospitals and often very grateful for the care provided, I remember a heart patient who caught a bus from Leytonstone to get to Whitechapel 'as it was the best hospital around' – his ECG showed a massive heart attack!

I registered as an SRN in 1980 – one of the last General Nursing Council registered nurses. Our set received training certificates and our 'LH' badge at a presentation in the Queen Mary's College Great Hall presided over by the late *Professor Baroness McFarlane of Llandaff* followed by tea and cream cakes – an event I still remember well where all my family (my parents, two brothers and two sisters) turned up.

As I look back over my years in the NHS, I reflect how fortunate we are to be able to elicit free health care at the point of need and whilst the NHS has its challenges it is still world leading in many aspects of care and treatment. I also restate the claim, that many of us will recognise, that our 'LH' training was world leading and one of the best preparations built on the legacy of many humble (and some formidable) and dedicated nurses who went before us – *"I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me"*.

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