

1970s

Nurses march over pay, the RCN becomes a trade union and discipline is relaxed to boost morale



In the 1970s nurses really started to fight back against what they saw as injustice. From 1971 onwards, industrial action became a significant feature among NHS staff and union power was strong.

The decade saw the first big strike – the ancillary workers strike of 1972 – when some 97,000 people were involved in industrial action.

Discontent reached boiling point for nurses in 1974 when the RCN submitted evidence to the health and social security secretary on the state of nursing, highlighting concerns about standards of care, staffing, education and training, and pay.

Nurses marched on 10 Downing Street, demonstrated outside the House of Commons and held a rally in Hyde Park.

The college called for and got an independent inquiry into nurses' pay. Lord Halsbury headed the inquiry team, and reported back in

September 1974. This was a watershed moment and the overall increase in pay was an average 30 per cent with actual increases varying between different grades.

Staff shortages, however, were an ongoing problem. In February 1971 Aberdeen's new coronary care unit was still empty after nine months due to a lack of staff. Shortly after, it was being used as a day ward.

Reviews appear to have been

KEY EVENTS

1974

- The Briggs report says the best nurse training should be provided in clinical settings

1974

- Pay rises of up to 58 per cent are awarded to nurses following industrial dispute

- Jean McFarlane becomes the first professor of nursing at the Faculty of Medicine at Manchester University

1977

- The RCN officially becomes a trade union under section 8 of the Employment Protection Act

- The nursing process sweeps through the profession – a philosophy based on assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation

1978

- The winter of discontent causes disruption to hospitals and helps the Conservatives to victory at the next election

1979

- The first heart transplant in the UK is performed at Papworth Hospital by Sir Terrance English

- Nurse Catherine Hall becomes the first nurse to be invited to sit on the General Medical Council, the doctors' regulatory body

- Male nurses are estimated to make up 10 to 12 per cent of the nursing population

- Discipline in hospitals is relaxed during the decade. Nurses' requests for shifts that suit their social life are listened to for the first time by ward sisters in an attempt to boost recruitment



The Briggs report recommended that nurses be trained in clinical settings

a popular theme of the decade. In 1970 then secretary of state for health and social security Richard Crossman issued a consultative green paper called *The Future Structure of the National Health Service*.

One month later he announced the setting up of the committee on nursing 'to review the role of the nurse and the midwife in the hospital and the community and the education and training required for that role'.

The early part of the decade was dominated by the Briggs report of 1972. This was the work of Professor Asa Briggs, who was asked to review the roles, training and education of nurses and midwives.

His report said that the nurse training was inadequate and failed to provide enough opportunities for them. He was of the opinion that basic nursing could only be learnt properly and thoroughly in clinical settings. Theoretical instruction should be related to that, he argued.

The report proposed a two-tier training course leading to two grades of nurse, a large expansion of training and teaching, and a new statutory body to take control of the nursing, midwifery and health visiting professions. Most of the report's recommendations did not become a reality apart from the eventual creation of a new regulator – the UKCC – but it provoked debate about extending and developing research within nursing.

In 1971 the Department of Health was secretly designing a national nurses' uniform. *Nursing Times* asked: 'Do all nurses want to look alike?' and 'Will the teaching hospitals give up their fancy dress?'

Male nurses numbered 30,000 by the early 1970s and the Sexual Discrimination Act of 1975 permitted equal access to nursing for both men and women. Men could, therefore, become midwives and there was a relaxation on men nursing female patients.

George Castledine became the first male 'sister' at Manchester Royal Infirmary. By 1979 10–12 per cent of all nurses were male, a rate that has remained reasonably static ever since.

The nursing process emerged in the mid-1970s. Put simply, this system meant finding out what the patient needed, planning how to provide it, providing it and then seeing if it worked. *NT* published an exclusive paper in 1975 called *The Nursing Process: the key to individualized care* by Ian Hargreaves, who was then a nursing student at Manchester University.

By 1977 it was all the rage in nursing circles. That year, *NT* produced a special issue focusing on the system and several articles provided the first detailed explanation of it. Over the next 10 years, this approach – with the four principles of assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation – became firmly entrenched in nursing.

Discipline in hospitals was being relaxed during the 1970s and patients were encouraged to use nurses' first names. For the first time ward sisters were asked to consider their nursing staff's requests for time off when planning duty rotas. This was an attempt to raise

The 1970s was a decade of many reviews



'The Briggs report said training failed to provide opportunities for nurses'

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morale and boost recruitment by considering flexible working patterns and admitting that nurses had a social life outside of work.

Existing rules over nurses' dress were not so rigidly observed and nurses did not always have to wear their caps.

Education was also changing. In 1974, the number of nursing schools was halved to 200 as part of an NHS reorganisation. However, they were expanded and each one related to one of the new area health authorities (AHAs) created that year.

The first English university department of nursing studies was established in 1970 in Manchester and nurse educationalists wanted more autonomy. Doctors were not invited to teach nursing students, a practice that had previously been standard.

While the UK had joined the European Economic Community in January 1973, international relations were not all they could be. By the end of 1974 the RCN wrote to the International Council of Nurses warning that it was considering leaving the body because of the increasing financial cost of membership and because it did not accept the ICN in its present form was relevant to the circumstances of the 1970s. Hurried meetings ensued and the college relented, but relations were damaged for some time.

In 1977 EEC Directives for Nursing led to a new educational curriculum based on the nursing process and by 1979 the shadow UKCC had been set up with the Joint Board of Clinical Nursing Studies in England and Wales and a similar body in Scotland approving more than 50 courses.

For one nurse at least, 1978 was a very good year for money. A charge nurse won £223,000 on the pools and *NT* asked why couldn't there be a national lottery in aid of the NHS? Some wishes, it appears, do come true.

By 1978 trouble over pay had surfaced again. Strikes in the NHS were becoming frequent and nurses made an 18 per cent pay rise claim to restore them to their 1974 post Halsbury-award earnings. Inflation had eaten away much of the value of those pay rises four years before.

'Pay not Peanuts' was the slogan used by protesting nurses at a mass meeting in January of 1978. About 2,000 attended and heckled politicians, despite a rail strike. Some proceeded to work to rule. The next two months were chaotic with strikes by ambulance staff but most employees were back at work by March after accepting a nine per cent pay increase and the offer of a comparability study.

By the end of the decade, nurses' pay was referred to the Clegg Commission and in 1980 resulting increases were about 22 per cent, but these did not re-establish pay to comparable levels with what had been achieved in 1974.

In 1979 the General Nursing Council, the then regulator, announced that to strike or take any sort of industrial action was to risk being found guilty of professional misconduct.

That same year heralded change with the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act confirming that the UKCC would take over the reigns of regulation early in the next decade.

The Royal Commission reported in July 1979, providing an account of patient services and the problems faced by NHS staff. It contained 117 recommendations, many of which were actually implemented over the coming years. It said the existing organisational structure of

NT in the 1970s

In January 1971 then editor Peggy Nuttall asked readers to call her up with their thoughts and opinions rather than send the usual letters – all because of a postal strike.

When the UK joined the European Economic Community in January 1973 an *NT* editorial said: 'As a profession, British nursing has much to give Europe. We have the chance to speak for ourselves and not to use doctors or lay administrators or civil servants as spokesmen.'

'But our contribution will be minimised if professional nurses speak only English and have only the haziest notion of the workings of the NHS and of their own profession.'

The 1977 Save District Nursing campaign was a highly successful drive by *NT* to ensure district nurses received their own statutory committee in the new legislation that established the UKCC seven years later. More than 20,000 car stickers were sent out, many meetings took place around the UK and eventually the government bowed to pressure and agreed to the committee.

In 1978 then editor Alison Dunne provoked a storm when she wrote about the poor hospital treatment she received when having her wisdom teeth removed. *NT* received a deluge of letters about this, with many



readers angry about a perceived criticism of nursing standards. Ms Dunne admitted later she had no idea this would touch such a nerve but argued nurses should be big enough to admit when standards were poor.

The first International Cancer Nursing Conference took place in London in 1978, a gathering of 1,400 cancer nurses from 28 different countries. *NT* backed the event and gave it full coverage.

Also in 1978 *NT* joined up with former travel company Project 67 to send groups of qualified nurses on three-month working holidays to Israel. The venture proved popular but unfortunately for UK nurse staffing some of the travellers decided to stay in Israel.

The image of nurses to most people was represented in the television series *Angels*, which featured on the cover of *NT* in September 1979. The magazine ran an extensive feature on the series, which took readers behind the scenes of the programme.

the NHS was too complex and had too many management tiers. Such opinions have a ring of familiarity about them for today's nurses.

Although relationships may have been changing between doctors and nurses, mutual recognition of each side's worth was maintained and in 1979 Catherine Mary Hall, a former RCN general secretary, was the first nurse ever to be invited to become a member of the General Medical Council – the doctors' regulatory body. ■