

A story to be told: A College is born

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It is almost ten years since the College celebrated the last big milestone in its history – the fiftieth anniversary.

Next year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the founding. In preparation, it is worth looking back at the first fifty years as recorded in *A voice to be heard: The first fifty years of the New South Wales College of Nursing* by Rosalie Pratt and R. Lynette Russell.

It is easy to forget, or perhaps one never knew, about the times in which the College, originally the New South Wales College of Nursing, was established, the vision and audacity of the women who founded it, and the sixteen years before it was born in a rush of competition forced by legislative, professional and industrial issues.

It is recognised that the College was founded in 1949 but, in fact, the story starts well before that date. As early as 1912 there had been discussion of the establishment of a Faculty of Nursing at The University of Sydney, which would provide undergraduate studies and by implication, postgraduate studies. Over the next two decades a number of professional and industrial nursing bodies would be formed, including the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), established in 1924, and the NSW Nurses' Association (NSWNA), then not a part of the ANF, founded in 1931 and registered as a trade union in 1945, but all with the broad aims of providing for nurses, either professionally or industrially.

In the late 1930s, about fifty participants attending the Annual Conference of Matrons met at the rooms of the NSW Nurses' Association to discuss a number of matters, including a proposal for the establishment of a College of Nursing (NSW) to provide post-registration courses for nurses, but the plans were hindered because of World War II. As Australia concentrated on the war effort, many domestic matters were put on hold and would not gain attention again until some years later.

The year 1949 was an interesting year in Australia. A strike by coal miners,

engineered by the Communist Party, allowed the conservative politician Robert Menzies to be swept to power as Prime Minister on the widespread public fear of communism/socialism. The Australian Labor Party was also under suspicion because of its support of the unions. World War II had ended five years earlier but Australia was still experiencing a period of reconstruction and reorganisation. The war had disrupted many facets of civilian life and impacted greatly on the nursing profession with many nurses having enlisted and many killed. Roles for women had changed because of their participation in the war effort and women were demanding more.

Not surprisingly, the nursing profession came to the attention of those reorganising the workforce – how it should be regulated, which was the right body to do so, whether professional and industrial issues should be managed by the same body, and whether such management should occur at a state or federal level. Issues such as the outcomes of war service, pre- and post-registration education, salaries and working conditions contributed to what was something of a mess.

The hope of establishing post-registration or postgraduate courses was kept alive by all of the nursing organisations. In late 1942 Muriel Know Doherty, at the time having been appointed to establish the Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service in NSW, presented a plan for "The College of Nursing NSW" to the NSW Hospitals' Commission. The plan was ambitious, emphasising a coordinated approach to the management of all matters related to nursing. According to the plan, the College would be established under Royal Charter with statutory powers and affiliated in some way so that the College could make recommendations on industrial issues, and the Nurses Registration Act embodied to give the College the authority to develop the syllabi and conduct pre-nursing, preliminary training and post-registration training courses for nurses. The College, it was proposed, would be funded by

government and supported with a membership fee.

The plan also required the incorporation of the Australian Trained Nurses Association (ATNA) and the NSWNA into the College so that there would be "one body only, without political, or social bias [which] should be responsible for the legislative, educational, domestic and recreational activities of nurses".¹

In response, the NSW Minister of Health convened a committee to consider the "Reorganisation of the Nursing Profession" which, after an exhausting eighteen months of at least weekly sittings, recommended the establishment of a College "under whose auspices all aspects of nursing ... would be dealt with"², along with the coopting of the higher and vocational education sectors with reference to post-graduate education. The report, known as the Kelly report, was never published.

Between 1946 and 1948, nursing organisations across Australia worked among themselves to garner support for a national College; however, with the country still undergoing post-war reconstruction and fears of socialism, it appeared that the Commonwealth Government was preparing to take unlimited control of medical and nursing services and their respective practitioners via the National Health Services Bill of 1947. For nurses, this meant even greater need for the establishment of a strong, united organisation which could speak to the government on behalf of all nurses. Miss Doherty's vision, however, was that a federal nursing organisation should be established after the establishment of state-based bodies, with a Federal Council being elected from the state colleges. This idea was very likely partly prompted by the distances between the state capitals, as indicated in a letter from the Institute of Hospital Matrons of NSW and ACT written in 1946. Even today, despite developments in communication technology, Australians remain physically and psychologically separated by vast distances.

Help please

The management of Health Heritage Collections throughout the healthcare facilities of NSW Health has been largely left to volunteers with very little infrastructure support and funding. Many collections have unfortunately been lost or damaged and in some cases existing collections are under threat because of space constraints or the lack of volunteers.

Judith Cornell AM has been commissioned by NSW Health to undertake a health heritage project which includes the updating of the existing Movable Heritage Policy as well as undertaking a mapping exercise to ascertain the location, number and scope of the existing collections which will lead to a report and recommendations for the future management of the collections.

A questionnaire has been devised to gather information and will be circulated via the Area Executive Officers early in 2009. Judith would appreciate hearing from any person involved with, or having knowledge of the location of, historical material to ensure that the distribution and return of questionnaires is as wide as possible and to ensure that the development of future policy is as inclusive as possible.

Further information may be sought by contacting Judith via email on judith@nursing.edu.au or by phone on 0429 302 943.

An apparent impediment to the establishment of a College was the understanding that such establishment would require the help of the government, which was understandable, considering what had been initially planned for the College. However, it having been clarified that this was not so, plans continued with various nursing organisations taking active roles in the progress of the plan. In 1948, for example, at the Annual Conference of the National Florence Nightingale Memorial Committee of Australia (FNCA), Gwen Burbidge, President, proposed a plan whereby a school would be established in Melbourne for the first five years before expanding to other states, with the Federal Minister for Health as its hierarchical head. There was opposition, however, from the ANF and The Nurses Guild, and the offer of 5000 pounds from the Minister was rejected on the understanding that such a grant would bring the new body under government control. The parent bodies agreed, voting for formation of a College under a corporate body. The Australasian Trained Nurse Association (ATNA), separately, also supported the idea of a corporate body.

Meanwhile, at the NSW branch of the FNCA it was perceived that the Minister had offered the money only to Victoria. Miss Doherty and Miss Looker disagreed with the Adelaide delegates about what had been agreed to and what had not.

The issue of the money continued to dominate people's thoughts as it was understood to be included, as a grant to Victoria, in the Commonwealth Health Bill. Miss Looker wrote an urgent letter to all members of the Matron's Institute urging them to unite in opposition to the apparent potential domination of the school by Victoria. She stated NSW wanted its own independent school.

The next day, "Miss Doherty penned a 'hasty and urgent note'"³ to a Queensland senator, claiming that Miss Looker had had the information first hand from the Federal Director-General of Health. "He evidently let the cat out of the bag inadvertently ..."³, she wrote.

Interestingly, the issue that dominated the nursing profession at the end of 1948 and the beginning of 1949 was the National Health Services Bill. The hopes for a body offering post-graduate education, however, were not far from the minds of the nurse leaders who had pursued it for so long and, just prior to the mass meeting of NSW nurses on 5 January 1949, called to discuss industrial issues, the nursing bodies who had been involved in its pursuit were advised that Dr Coppleson, President of the Post Graduate Committee in Medicine, The University of Sydney, wanted to meet to discuss courses, lectures and timetables.

The mass meeting resulted in calls for, among other things, the appointment of a Registered Nurse as Director of Post Graduate Nursing, not later than March 1949; a call for all nurses to lobby their state MP with regard to the same; and the Federal Health Minister to fund the states for the immediate setting up of post graduate courses. The mass meeting established a committee drawn from the four organisations – the Australasian Trained Nurses Association (NSW), the NSW Nurses' Association, the Institute of Hospital Matrons of NSW and ACT, and The Nurses Guild (NSW). On 10 January 1949, the committee met "in a shabby back room in Bligh Street [Sydney]". The minutes of that meeting, held in the College archives, are headed "Inaugural meeting for the formation of the College of Nursing"⁴.

The time had come and the College was born.

¹ Doherty papers, ML 442/2/6

² Russell, *Off the Record* (29)

³ Pratt and Russell, 2002, p.13

⁴ Pratt and Russell, 2002, p.16

A voice to be heard: The first fifty years of the New South Wales College of Nursing by Rosalie Pratt and R. Lynette Russell, hardback, 254 pages, is available from the College library for \$10.00 plus postage and handling.