

What are Nursing Duties ?

by Shan Daniels

Nurses share widely differing views on the subject of their responsibilities and duties. The author puts forward her views, especially on the subject of 'menial' tasks.

On a recent visit to my old training school, a somewhat spirited discussion arose between my former tutor, a colleague, and myself, concerning current 'winds of change' sweeping through the nursing profession.

We talked about the attitudes of nurses to the designation of their duties; how—very wisely—the so-called non-nursing duties were being allocated to untrained staff, in order to leave the nurse free to devote extra time to the work for which she has been trained.

However, the specific nature of this work appears to be in question, apparently, there are nurses in training who object to giving bed-pans, to changing soiled sheets and to feeding patients. These tasks are evidently regarded as menial, non-skilled occupations, able to be performed by other untrained workers. One ventures to inquire exactly what duties the nurse is saving her time for!

It is amazing to note the great enthusiasm with which we are able to discuss an extensive list of 'non-nursing duties', but, have you ever noticed how our voices appear to fade away to vague whisperings when we turn our attentions to consideration of nursing duties? Surely, there is something terribly wrong with nursing today if this is the case and the problem demands our most urgent and serious thought.

Care Comes First

During my own professional training not so very long ago I was fortunate enough to be schooled by tutors with very definite views on the aims and objectives of nursing. Without exception, the patients' care and comfort came first; everything else could wait. It was never a case of talking about 'that coronary patient in Griffith Ward'

rather 'Mr. Davies, that nice man with the pretty wife, who had a coronary while at work.' A suitable difference!

I shall never forget one of my tutor's favourite anecdotes concerning a patient who asked her for a urinal. A few minutes after giving it to him she returned to collect and empty it and was confronted by an extremely embarrassed patient full of apologies. 'I'm so sorry sister—I thought you were a nurse!' She replied very promptly and not a little disturbed, that she hoped she still was a nurse!

Wider concepts

What are we training nurses for today, I wonder? Are we misguidedly filling their heads with so much technical information that they forget the all-important objective of total patient care? If this is so, we are failing miserably in our duty. In my own work of community nursing, there are much greater opportunities for practising the wider concepts of nursing care, for one cannot help but be concerned with the patient's physical, psychological and social needs.

Nevertheless, some district staff still question the need for supervisory visits of the elderly, and in doing so they fail to appreciate that these provide occasions for professional skill in observation, as opposed to demonstration of practical prowess. Why do we persist in making our work appear trivial? The more senior we become the more responsibilities we have to shoulder, but that does not absolve us of our duty to continue day-to-day care of our patients.

A nurse is a person caring for the sick, so let us remember to care, and concern ourselves less with shelving our responsibilities.

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