

Why Discrimination in Nursing ?

WHEN we speak of a "Nurse" the image of a female nurse in uniform appears before our minds. There is a popular tendency to associate the profession of nursing with the female although it is not the domain of the fair sex.

The meaning of the word Nurse according to the American Medical Dictionary is: "A person who takes care of the sick, wounded or enfeebled, especially one who makes a profession of it." But yet there is discrimination in our thinking which has developed into discrimination in training and employment opportunities available for the male nurse. How does this affect the profession as a whole needs to be examined.

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What is Nursing? Writing on "Our Medical and Nursing Heritage" Dr. S.L. Bhatia says: "The material and paternal instinct is the main source of the nursing impulse. It is found in human beings of all ages and of both sexes." Indeed man has shared the responsibility in the care of the sick, the aged, the helpless and the handicapped and in the promotion of health in the community from time immemorial when there was no organised nursing. He gave way when women came into the field because he was charged with greater responsibilities like earning the bread for the family through other avocations which women seldom did.

Religious influences, progress of medical science, awakening and emancipation made it possible for women to share this responsibility with men on a community basis. One would read with interest the three great Orders of Knight Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta in the late Middle Ages when the dual role of a knight and a nurse was played by men. Thereafter, nursing fell into a dark period and Florence Nightingale picked up the thread and gave nursing a new direction.

Circumstances compelled Miss Nightingale to give a general call to women to join nursing mainly to make use of the unutilised women-power for the service of mankind. But today when women equally invade all fields of service including the police and the army, the situation is different and to speak of nursing in relation to women alone is not keeping in tune with the changed conditions.

The functions of the profession are varied in nature. Neither the male nor the female nurse is in a

position to perform the task with equal effectiveness. Experience tells and sociological survey would reveal that even the urban population seem to suffer a psychological trauma when attended for catheterisation, enematas, surgical preparation etc. by female nurses. Then again how many female nurses would volunteer to perform these types of jobs?

India would need an estimated 8,87,860 nurses by 1991 to reach the ratio of at least 1 : 1,000 population. This target would remain far from being realised if the field is limited to female nurses alone. The situation would be further aggravated by the social stigma attached to the profession even though nursing has often been called a noble profession by many "great and good."

Our present day experience will prove that there is a great difference in the standard of nursing service rendered by married and unmarried nurses. Only a few could do justice to the dual responsibility of home and hospital. How many female nurses would continue to sacrifice their life for the sake of the profession and remain spinsters?

Material inadequacies and unsuitable conditions act as a deterrent to nursing service in remote rural areas. With 82 per cent of our population in rural areas, the country is faced with the problem of providing adequate medical facilities in these areas. Male nurse is the only answer for the ill-served and unserved population. Further the men of the villages hardly accept nursing by female nurses.

"Affection cannot be manufactured or regulated by law. If one has no affection for a person or system, one should be free to give the fullest expression to one's dissatisfaction, as long as one does not contemplate, promote or incite violence." M.K. Gandhi.

Medicine and nursing constitute the health services of a Nation and this field is to be developed solely on grounds of merit and need. Any denial of equal opportunity, competitive enrolment and a uniform promotion policy for both the sexes in the field, will be contrary to the guarantees enshrined in Article 15 and 16 of our Constitution.

The existing discrimination shown to the male nurse in the matter of promotion and other opportunities is deplorable. When qualified male nurses with adequate experience are available female nurses are promoted and given higher status and higher pay in many of our hospitals. In the Army raw graduate female nurses are offered commissioned ranks whereas experienced and more qualified male nurses continue to remain as nursing orderlies. This discrimination is all the more evident in the Army Medical Services where a female doctor rarely get a chance in the commissioned rank. If the centre of service is the same person, the patient, why this discrimination?

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