

HISTORY OF THE BENGAL NURSING COUNCIL

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The history of the movement for instituting an organised system of training and examination of nurses and midwives in Bengal, as well as providing for their registration, can be traced back to the year 1922. In that year the Government of Bengal sanctioned a scheme for providing a regular course of instruction and a qualifying examination for nurses and midwives, with the object of standardising their training and examination. They authorised the Governing Body of the State Medical Faculty of Bengal to hold the examinations and to award qualifying certificates according to the regulations prescribed for the purpose. The regulations laid down the preliminary qualifications, courses of training and subjects for examination, and also provided for the grant of a senior and junior certificate in nursing and midwifery.

The examinations for nursing and midwifery certificates under the regulations were held by the Faculty for the first time in May 1923. In 1934 revised regulations were prescribed with the object of improving the training of nurses and midwives by raising the standard as far as practicable to that obtaining in the United Kingdom. The examinations under the revised regulations have been held since 1936. There are now three hospitals recognised as qualified to train for the Senior certificate in Nursing, fifteen for the Junior certificate, and eleven for Midwifery. The total number of Nurses and Midwives enrolled in Bengal to 31st December 1939 is: Nurses, 1,303; Midwives, 1,198; a total of 2,501. The number of registered nurses and midwives includes the holders of diplomas in nursing and midwifery obtained from recognised institutions prior to May 1923, who were allowed to come on the register without further examination.

The legal position of the arrangement, under which the State Medical Faculty registered qualified nurses and midwives and certified them as such, in exercise of the power vested in it by the executive orders of Government, was found to be unsatisfactory. Although they were able to practise in nursing and midwifery, they could not, in the absence of a provision having the force of law requiring them to be registered under some public authority, obtain recognition in other parts of India and the British Empire. In order to remove this disability, it was decided to introduce legislation. The Bengal Nurses Bill, 1933, was accordingly introduced in the Bengal Legislative Council. The Bill provided for the establishment of a Council called the "Bengal Nursing Council". It also provided for the transfer to the registers of the Council, without being required to undergo further training and examination, of the names of the nurses and midwives who were enrolled on the registers of the State Medical Faculty, as well as for the registration of qualified nurses and midwives who were registered as such in any part of the British Empire.

The Bengal Nurses Act, 1934, (Bengal Act X. of 1934), which became law in February 1934, came into force with effect from 13th February 1936. The first Nursing Council was constituted by the Local Government on 23rd March 1936. The preliminary work of the Council was the drafting of rules and regulations. These, framed by a Committee specially selected for the purpose, and accepted by the Council, were published by the Government in February 1938. A nurse Registrar was then appointed with the sanction of the Local Government and the office of the Nursing Council commenced to function fully on 9th February 1938, taking over from the State Medical Faculty all matters connected with nurses and midwives which had hitherto been dealt with by the Faculty. Two nursing and three midwifery examinations are now held yearly by the Council.

As soon as the Council's office was established, the question of reciprocal registration with England was taken up. The terms as set out by the General Nursing Council for England and Wales were agreed to by the Bengal Nursing Council in November 1938 and ratified by the Local Government in April 1939. Reciprocal registration has thus now been extended by the English Council to the Medical College, Calcutta, and the Presidency General Hospital, Calcutta. This is an inestimable boon to nurses trained in these hospitals, many of whom now live permanently in England and were unable to secure employment as their Indian certificates were not recognised. It is hoped, in the near future, to have reciprocal registration with all Provinces in India having Nurses and Midwives Councils working under a Government enactment similar to the Bengal Nursing Council, which will permit of free registration to nurses and midwives wishing to be transferred from Bengal to other Provinces.

The first Nursing Council constituted by Government, after functioning for three years, went out of office on 23rd March 1939 and new members were appointed for a further period of three years. Certain members were nominated by the Government, but one registered nurse and one registered midwife were elected by the nurses and midwives on the electoral roll, thus allowing for the election of members understanding and sympathising with the needs of nurses and midwives.

The Bengal Nurses Act also provides for the training, examination and registration of Health Visitors, for which rules have been drafted by the Council and submitted to Government. Their issue is still awaited.