

South African Nursing History: Time to Reconsider and Revitalise

“The search for a profession’s identity is bound up with the social and historical roots that lead to its creation” (Sweeney 2005:62).

South Africans interested in the country’s history are probably glued to their car radios, television sets and electronic news feeds these days. One cannot be historically inclined and remain unaware of the debate about historical statues across the country. These events cause one to reflect on how South Africans interpret the current artistic portrayal of their history and most importantly, how constructively (or not) South Africans express their opinions. It raises the question: what would be considered an inclusive, current South African history?

Similar reflections may be directed towards South African nursing’s history. We have statues representing nurses such as Henrietta Stockdale and Cecelia Makiwane. Our ethics text books and lecture room hours are dominated by the remarkable achievements of Florence Nightingale, Henrietta Stockdale, Cecelia Makiwane and Charlotte Searle (to name but a few). These are the historical figures my learners vaguely remember two days after the history lecture. And rightly they should: no discussion about *the birth* of professional nursing in South Africa can be complete without mention of these distinguished nurses. But, is that all we can do for South African nursing history? Regurgitate the accomplishments of historical nurse leaders and hope one student in the class expresses an interest? Do descriptions of the lives and achievements of nurse leaders long past add value to curriculums already overflowing with theoretical content? We must acknowledge that most nurses find it difficult to associate with historical figures that lived long before they were born and question the influence history has on their professional careers.

Nurses should ask and attempt to answer potentially difficult questions related to South African nursing history. Consider the following:

- What value do we attach to our uniquely South African nursing history? How do we communicate appreciation for our nursing history in the profession?
- How can our unique history contribute to creating a professional ethos and unity in nursing? Therefore: do we study history so that we can strengthen and retain that which are good in our profession — and not repeat the blunders of the past?
- Do we use nursing history to inform and guide our professional activities?

- How inclusive is the historical content? Does it reflect the history of black, white, colored and Indian nurses in South Africa?
- Do South African nurses have an action plan that will assist in preserving our history in a manner that conveys respect and dignity to all involved?
- What historical content do we convey in class rooms? Does the history of South African nursing start with Florence Nightingale and end with Cecelia Makiwane? Is there nothing after 1908 to discover or discuss?

In the past few months, I have had various discussions with fellow South African nursing history enthusiasts and I came to the conclusion that some form of dialogue about, and support for an inclusive South African nursing history is required. It also became evident that there are nurses all over the country who have innovative, practical ways of keeping nursing history's core values active and its achievements evident. They need the encouragement and support from a like-minded collective. I therefore invite you to join this online forum dedicated to matters pertaining to South African nursing history. The aims are:

- Discuss how South African nursing history can assist in supporting and strengthening our professional ethos.
- Debate how our nursing history can be represented meaningfully and inclusively in literature, art and professional activities.
- Share ideas of how to facilitate an understanding of nursing history so that it contributes meaningfully to the curriculum. History is so much more than a list of dates, names and events.
- Support fellow history enthusiasts' history related projects, thus creating a milieu in which history is evident in all our special events.
- Create a data base of the whereabouts of art, documents or photographs related to the history of South African nursing.
- Create an easy access, electronically based South African nursing history presence.

The listed aims are diverse and comprehensive. Not something that can be done by one person – and definitely not in a short time. But, we have to start somewhere. Our first online discussion should therefore be about the “what”, “how” and “who” and “when” of commencing with such a venture. We owe it to future generations of South African nurses to not distort or gloss over our professional history. Neither can we deny it. Gaddis (1995:23) states: “The existence of unfrozen contingencies is what distinguish the present and the future from the past; and anyone who ignores this fact – who tries to write change and circumstance out of history – not only distorts that subject, but leaves those who would learn from it ill prepared to confront one of the major

conditions of their own lives” Therefore “...history transmits experience by showing how human behaviour, tectonic forces, and contingency can intersect one another.”

Our nursing history should be portrayed as honestly and objectively (considering the epistemological nature of historical inquiry no easy feat) as possible. It can inform and guide us in all matters pertaining to professionalism and ethos. This forum intends to invite an exclusive group of interested nurses to debate the historical issues mentioned and to report and act on the suggested aims. Please join me in this endeavor!

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References:

Gaddis, J.L. 1995. *On contemporary history*. An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 18 May 1993. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Sweeney, J. F. 2005. Historical Research: Examining Documentary Sources. *Nurse Researcher* 12(3): 61–73.