

THE VALUE OF NURSING HISTORY TODAY

CNA POSITION

CNA believes that learning from nursing history is critical to advancing the profession in the interests of the Canadian public. Knowledge of nursing history socializes new nurses¹ into the profession and encourages different forms of critical thinking among nurses.

CNA believes that an understanding of nursing history is critical to participation in health-care reform today. Nursing history provides the public with valuable perspectives on emerging health technologies, health-care reform, transformations of nursing practice and gender issues in Canadian society.

CNA believes that the responsibility for the collection, preservation, research and dissemination of nursing history is shared among individual nurses, nursing history researchers, nurse educators, nursing organizations and health-care agencies, nursing alumni associations, governments, and museums and archives. All share the responsibility to integrate nursing history into nursing education and professional awareness and to actively support nursing historical research.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Individual nurses** have a responsibility to preserve nursing history by sharing historical materials and experiences (e.g., artifacts, oral histories and biographies).
- **Researchers of nursing history** are responsible for engaging in scholarly research through peer-reviewed and ethically approved studies that adhere to established professional historical practices and for validating, refining and challenging existing knowledge as well as generating new knowledge.²
- **Nurse educators** are responsible for integrating historical concepts and content into curricula as well as updating teaching materials. They are responsible for imparting a sense of the value of nursing history to students. They are responsible for reading, assessing and applying scholarly research and publication in the area of nursing history.
- **Nursing alumni associations** are responsible for contributing to the preservation of their materials by transferring items to archives and museums.
- **Nursing organizations and health-care agencies** are responsible for collecting and preserving materials related to nursing.

¹ For the purpose of this document, *nurses* refers to registered nurses.

² (College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia, 2005)



- **Governments** are responsible for preserving the history of nursing in Canada. They do so by supporting museums, archives and publications and by supporting researchers of nursing history.
- **Museums and archives** are responsible for preserving and providing access to nursing history for study, research, clinical and educational purposes.³

BACKGROUND

An understanding of the history of nurses and nursing practice contributes to the development of a professional identity among nurses. Knowledge of past events and people and of how they have shaped nursing has the potential to promote professional self-understanding, group cohesiveness and a certain amount of pride. The idea of who is a nurse and what constitutes nursing practice has changed over time. An understanding of the profession's history provides nurses with knowledge of their practice relationships with other health-care professionals and encourages critical reflection on the value of nurses' contributions in the past.

Nursing history encompasses collecting, preserving, researching, studying and analyzing nurses' contributions to the profession and to health care in Canada. The study of history can challenge conventional wisdom by suggesting alternative explanations for current nursing issues. It introduces nursing students and current practitioners to the interdisciplinary world of humanities and broadens their repertoire of research skills.⁴

Therefore it is important to incorporate nursing history into the curricula of nursing schools and faculties. Not only does nursing history offer contextual perspectives, it can also provide students with a sense of professional heritage and identity.⁵

The practice of nursing takes place within larger cultural, economic and political contexts that have helped shape the discipline. Nurses need to centre their research and development of professional practice within a knowledge and understanding of trends and patterns in the past. It is essential for nurse clinicians, educators, administrators, researchers and policy-makers to understand the challenges and opportunities of the past in order to prepare direction for the future. Therefore, a historical perspective is important to the quality of care in all of the domains of nursing:⁶ "Uncovering past trends is a vital part of all nursing research."⁷

Current nursing history research illuminates the complexity and diversity within the profession. Nursing comprises diverse practices, roles and identities that require ongoing historical inquiry to inform current changes in health care. Recent work in nursing history offers new directions for analyzing practice and makes visible the many dimensions that shape care.⁸

Nurses in Canada have participated in constructing the Canadian nation through their involvement with the development of both formal and informal aspects of the health system. Knowledge of nursing history identifies the ways in which nurses have shaped both the care of the sick and the promotion of health in Canada. Never before has the voice of nurses resonated as strongly in policy development and at so many levels in program planning.⁹

³ (College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2003)

⁴ (American Association for the History of Nursing, 2001)

⁵ (American Association for the History of Nursing, 2001)

⁶ RN practice comprises different and interrelated domains of activity, including direct practice, education, administration, research and policy.

⁷ (Nurses Association of New Brunswick, 2003)

⁸ (Toman & Stuart, 2004)

⁹ (Canadian Nurses Association, 2000)

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Canadian Nurses Association, 50 Driveway, Ottawa ON K2P 1E2
Tel: 613-237-2133 or 1-800-361-8404 Fax: 613-237-3520
Website: www.cna-aiic.ca E-mail: info@cna-aiic.ca



The Canadian Nursing History Collection^{10, 11} is a key nursing resource documenting the story of nursing in Canada and featuring materials, photographs and artifacts from the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), the Nursing Sisters Association of Canada and individual collections.¹² The collection is located physically within the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian War Museum and Library and Archives Canada and is also available online (<http://www.civilization.ca/tresors/nursing/ncint01e.html>) in collaboration with these three organizations. Individual nurses, nursing specialty groups, nursing associations and others interested in nursing can contribute to nursing archives and museums across Canada that contain historical materials. These collections are living entities with the capacity to grow.

Approved by the CNA Board of Directors, September 2007

References:

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Nurses Association of New Brunswick. (2003). *Nursing history research*. Retrieved July 25, 2007, from <http://www.nanb.nb.ca/index.cfm?include=history2>

Toman, C., & Stuart, M. (2004). Emerging scholarship in nursing history. *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 21(2), 223-227.

Also see:

Canadian Association for the History of Nursing (<http://www.cahn-achn.ca/>)

Replaces:

Promoting Nursing History (2004)

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¹⁰ The signatory partners of the collection are the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian War Museum, Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA).

¹¹ For an overview of the collection and its history, please see Bates, C. (2004). The material of practice: The Canadian nursing history collection. *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 21(2), 377-385.

¹² The Canadian Nursing History Collection began in 2001 with the transfer of items from CNA to the signatory partners. Although maintaining a historical record is not the association's mandate, CNA has documented its activities in Canada and around the world and preserved the story of nursing in Canada since CNA was founded in 1908.

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