

THE VOICE OF NURSING

1: The Royal College of Nursing



Photograph of Dame Sarah Swift, founder of the College of Nursing
Circa 1920, photographer unknown

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Sarah Swift, Matron-in-Chief of the British Red Cross, was the first to suggest a College of Nursing.

In 1916, nursing was an unregulated profession. While prominent figures such as Florence Nightingale had championed teaching schools for nurses, each was responsible for setting its own standards for training and consistency was lacking. Anyone could claim to be a nurse.

Added to this, those nurses who had been trained were concerned about the influx of volunteer 'nurses' or VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses) following the First World War. In many cases these women had as little as two weeks first aid training.

Swift joined forces with MP Sir Arthur Stanley, and her idea for a college quickly gained support from other hospital matrons. One hundred years ago, on 27 March 1916, the College of Nursing was established.

The College was instrumental in persuading parliament to introduce the regulation of nursing and in 1919 the Regulation of Nurses Act was passed for England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (which was still part of the UK at the time). This meant that all nurses had to learn the same subjects and meet the same standards.

In 1928 the College was granted a royal charter, and in 1939 became known as the Royal College of Nursing.

Speaking up for nurses

Right from the start the College of Nursing campaigned to support nurses, whether it was to protect private nurses from unscrupulous agencies at the start of the 20th century, demand better safety precautions around the use of needles at the start of the 21st century or increase staffing levels to improve patient care today.

Although it wasn't until 1977 that the College officially became a trade union, it had been involved in negotiations about pay and working conditions since it began.

The voice of nursing

Today the RCN has 430,000 members. The College helps nurses with their professional development through learning events and resources and works with members and other organisations to promote innovation in nursing practice. It also campaigns for good working conditions for nurses. The goal is that patients will receive the best nursing care possible from a proactive workforce that is well informed and able to perform at its best.

Activity

Take a look at the photograph. What is Sarah Swift trying to convey in the picture? Think about her pose and what she is wearing? What does she want people to think about herself and nursing?

Sarah Swift set up the RCN to help standardise nursing. Working in groups make a list of three rules for being a good nurse in 1916. Feed back to the class and discuss why you've chosen the rules and what might be different now.

Fact: Despite being an all-female organisation, Sarah Swift had to partner with MP Arthur Stanley as women were not allowed to be MPs until 1930

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