



Nursing Diversities

The Generational Differences Among Today's Nurses

Gone are the days when nurses wore white caps and aprons, when medical supplies were always sterilized and never disposed of, and when hospitals were the sole institutions to grant diplomas. Gone are those days, but remaining are the nurses who lived through them. Today, nurses from different generations, backgrounds, experiences, and education walk the same hallways and work together in the same environments. The mature and younger generations bring distinct perspectives to health care. By sharing their knowledge and skills, they improve their practices and techniques, and at Sturdy Memorial Hospital, this kind of diversity promotes cooperation, staff development, and the highest quality of care.

Routine Practices

For the newer generations, it may be difficult to imagine, and for the older, it may be difficult to recall, what health care was like 20, 30, and even 40 years ago. Joyce Moore, RN, a nurse in the Hospital's Post Anesthesia Care Unit and Surgical Day Care, has been a Sturdy employee since 1971. As a Baby Boomer with 37 years of experience as a nurse, she recounts historical transformations in the roles, responsibilities, and routine practices in the profession.

"When I first started, almost 40 years ago, certain tasks took up much of our time," says Moore. "We washed, dried and powdered packages, and sterilized gloves. Bed baths were performed ritually, and back rubs were given to all patients in the morning and at night. We don't do these things anymore."

Now, nurses have more complex and changing roles. Heightened attention paid to infection control has shifted routine practices from sanitizing to the disposal of most medical supplies. More prestigious educational programs that educate nurses in the application of advancing technologies have transformed the profession. "Nurses are now more autonomous, respected, and take on more clinical responsibilities," says Moore.

Techniques and Technologies

Technological advancements have redefined the field to expand the roles and responsibilities of nurses. Monitoring a patient's health now not only involves the detection of health failure, but also, and more importantly, the warning signs before its onset. Joyce Moore says, "Now, proactive, critical-thinking nursing care has dramatically improved patient outcomes."

Amanda Hill-Cooke, RN, Clinical Coordinator of the Hospital's Balfour Nursing Unit and a Generation X-er, defines proactive nursing as an effect of technological innovations: "The focus now is on critical, clinical indicators. Clinical coordinators, charge nurses, and clinical staff focus on indicators that a patient's symptoms are worsening. These indicators allow nurses to prevent a patient's deterioration *before* it occurs, whereas before, without these indicators, nurses dealt with the deterioration as it occurred."

The Advantages

Older generations of nurses have practiced nursing in the past without certain technologies that exist today, some of which the newer nurses have learned while concurrently establishing their careers. All generations, however, can see the upsides, and drawbacks, of new technologies.

Generations X and Y, born into this world with personal computers and cell phones, characteristically find it effortless to learn and handle the latest trends in technology. Jamie Amaral, RN, who has been employed for the past three years both as a Medical/Surgical and Maternity nurse at the Hospital, is from Generation Y, the most recent generation. She arrived into the profession during the changeover from paper to computerized clinical documentation. According to Amaral, "Once a new technology is learned, it is generally for the better. With computer documentation, inserting information is faster and allows more time to spend with patients."

Sarah White, RN, a nurse in the Hospital's ICU for the past five years and a Generation X-er, finds that technology "allows for better accuracy in documenting, with a lesser chance of making errors. Patient outcomes are now much better as a result."

The Disadvantages

Whereas nurses from Generations X and Y have acclimated into the profession alongside the emergence of new technologies, nurses from the Silent and Baby Boomers generations have worked before and after these changes, and therefore have slightly varied views. Barbara Williams, RN, a nurse on the Hospital's Montplaisir Nursing Unit, was born on the brink between the Silent and Baby Boomer generations and has been a nurse since the 1960s. She believes that although technology improves patient care, it takes time to learn. "With technology comes more steps," she says. "Nurses have to continually learn and apply the most current technologies. Passwords are needed for each machine and each machine serves a specific purpose. Nursing Practice, however, is becoming more organized and more complex, as a result."

In the 40 years that Barbara has been a nurse, she has come to realize that although technology has impacted her profession, the nature of nursing has never changed. “The basic principles for nursing are the same,” says Williams. “Sick patients need certain things. Perhaps the technologies are different, but when you are helping someone who is sick, or having a baby, or having a heart attack, that nurse-patient relationship and support through that critical period in the patient’s life doesn’t change.”

Working Together

In any workplace environment, a give-and-take arrangement exists between colleagues in which every component of the team has something to teach, and something to learn. According to Barbara Williams, “Hospitals and medical facilities need a blend of both the younger generations, who have more current education and more energy, and the older generations, who have more experience.”

Joyce Moore believes, “The younger generations bring different perspectives, new knowledge to nursing, and welcome our help as they become accustomed to the reality of the profession after their formal education ends.”

Sarah White offers a Generation-X standpoint on the generations that have come before and after her own. “Across the board, the older generations are certainly an instrument in the type of nurse I am becoming. As a new graduate, and even now, I have had several mentors. They were the core of my practice. These nurses were patient in teaching me the basic elements of patient care, such as listening to heartbeats, and were more than willing to teach me these things. They welcomed me here at Sturdy.”

“The younger generations,” Sarah continues, “are the ones who know the newest technologies and the newest ways to do things. I am trying to be a sponge around them. They always bring the most up-to-date standards and procedures, and I appreciate that because we older generations aren’t in the academic classroom anymore.”

Although medicine is ever-evolving, the needs of patients are a constant. This changing yet static field is fortified by a combination of the older generations’ experience and understanding, and the fresh insight and education of the newer generations. Though nurses from different generations have different skills and perspectives, they share the common belief that working together broadens their understanding and enhances their ability to care for patients. Sturdy Memorial Hospital is a stronger, more advanced institution because of the collaboration and teamwork of its diverse staff of nurses. The strength, then, is in the balance.