

# PROFESSIONALISM AND THE NURSING UNIFORM OF TODAY AND THE FUTURE

## INTRODUCTION

Since the earliest beginnings, caretakers of the sick have struggled for recognition (Zerr, 2010). Nursing has crossed many milestones over the ages, with nursing leaders continually striving for professional recognition (Zerr, 2010). The nursing uniform has played an important part in the growth of the professional identity of nurses.

The crisp, all-white uniforms that nurses began to don in the early 1900s have been associated with the nursing profession for decades and will undoubtedly remain a prominent image for some time. (Kaser, 2009). Consequently, the nurse today is not free of the image that the uniforms of the past have created in the public mind. This project examines whether the professional image of nursing has been adversely affected by today's ubiquitous scrubs.

The project originated through work being conducted by practice partner Sheila Zerr RN, MEd, BSc. Sheila is involved in the study of the history of Canadian nursing uniforms and has designed a set of portrait dolls representing the major changes in the joint program of the Vancouver General Hospital and University of British Columbia Schools of Nursing uniforms from 1899 to 1998. The collection is on display at the Vancouver General Hospital.

## PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project was to explore the influence of the current-day nursing uniform on the development of professional identity and recommend how nursing uniforms should change or whether they should stay the same in the near future. This was accomplished by conducting short interviews to gather insight on how those involved in health care view the current-day nursing uniform and whether they believe it hinders or promotes a professional view of nursing. Additionally, current literature was searched to supplement the information obtained through the interviews.

## PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- To research current-day nursing uniforms and how they came to be
- To explore new uniform trends
- To conduct informal interviews with a variety of stakeholders (nurses, students, patients, CRNBC) to explore their thoughts and level of satisfaction with the current-day uniform.
- To summarize findings into a presentable format
- To recommend whether the nursing uniform should change or whether it should stay the same in the near future to promote a professional view of the nursing profession
- If applicable, to suggest ways to enhance the current uniformity.

## METHODS

The literature was searched to identify current nursing uniform trends, issues and opinions. Interview questions were designed based on literature findings. Informal interviews with a variety of stakeholders were conducted in the winter months of 2010 (see chart below). Participation was voluntary and participant names were kept confidential. Additionally, an email survey was sent out to the 4th year nursing class at UBC. Interview information was then reviewed for major themes.

## INTERVIEW & SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Type of participant	Number of participants
Various nurses from Ottawa and Vancouver	15
Former patients from Ottawa and Vancouver	10
General Public	15
CRNBC	1
4 <sup>th</sup> year nursing students from UBC SoN (Survey respondents)	68
Medical Students	2

## OUTCOMES OR DELIVERABLES FROM THE PROJECT

Christina Bates, an archivist at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, will be publishing a book called *Looking Closely: Material and Visual Approaches to the Nurse's Uniform*, later this year. She has asked that some of the information from the project's informal interviews be included in her book. Additionally, the UBC School of Nursing website media team has asked to include parts of the project on the website.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED FROM PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT

This project helped develop useful skills in a variety of areas including: generating stakeholder analyses, developing an informal survey, informal interviewing, reviewing the literature, teamwork, and collaborating with a practice partner.

## PROS AND CONS OF SCRUBS



This picture displays the traditional Uniforms of the Vancouver General Hospital School of Nursing from 1899 to 1998. This illustration depicts the traditional nurses uniform before the advent of the “scrubs” the current attire of the professional nurse.

## DEFINITION OF SCRUBS

**Scrubs** are the shirts and trousers or gowns worn by [nurses](#), [surgeons](#), and other [operating room](#) personnel when "scrubbing in" for [surgery](#). In the United Kingdom, they are sometimes known as Theatre Blues. Scrubs are designed to be simple, with minimal places for dirt to hide, easy to launder, and inexpensive to replace if damaged or stained irreparably. The wearing of scrubs has been extended outside of surgery in many [hospitals](#). Originally issued as replacement clothing if street clothing was contaminated, scrubs are now worn by any hospital personnel in any clean environment.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender-neutral</li> <li>• Allow for personal expression of style, colour and pattern. (CB)</li> <li>• Practical and functional – Don't show dirt as much as white uniforms</li> <li>• Economical</li> <li>• Comfortable</li> <li>• “Don't have to think about what to wear in the morning.”</li> <li>• Durable enough to survive frequent laundering (Kaser, 2009)</li> <li>• Appear professional when the nurse wearing them is well-groomed and tasteful in his or her scrub choice</li> <li>• Available in a wide variety of sizes</li> <li>• Infection Control</li> <li>• Helps to decrease hierarchical power structures when everyone is dressed the same</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clear identifier - Difficult to tell which person is the nurse, as many health care professionals wear scrubs</li> <li>• The lack of strict rules about dress-code leaves the door open for what some may consider unacceptable variations such as tight pants and revealing tops.</li> <li>• Less of a sense of uniformity when nurses are able to select their own styles, colours and patterns</li> <li>• Not viewed as professional by all, especially printed pat</li> </ul>

## EMERGING TRENDS



Hospitals in Ontario have adopted new trends in attempt to increase professional image and help better identify their nurses. The Hospital for Sick Kids introduced a new line of Roots uniforms (below) which have been very well received by patients and staff. Some parents however, feel that their children are being cared for by nurses who look like they could be day camp counsellors. The CIVIC Hospital in Ottawa recently introduced mandatory lab coats for their nursing staff that have a large RN embroidered on the front. This month, the CIVIC hospital has also announced its new hospital- wide ban on printed scrubs in an effort to make nurses easier to spot as part of the hospital's new "service excellence" plan. Many nurses at the hospital are not pleased and feel that patients get more nervous around nurses in white lab coats, which the nurses call the "white coat syndrome." Several other hospitals in the United States like Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta have gone completely back to white for their nursing staff. Findings from various recent studies suggest that patients, especially older ones, often prefer being cared for by nurses in white uniforms and question the ability and knowledge of nurses not dressed in the traditional white uniform (Kaser, 2009). Reactions among nurses are still mixed after five years, but the nurses are no longer invisible say the patients. Many argue that wearing white conjures up an "angelic image" of nurses (Linn, 2004). Nurses at Grady also feel that the white gets dull and dingy fast and that they're *so* last century (AJN, 2010).

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The themes that emerged from the interviews and from reviewing the literature were fairly mixed. It was however fairly evident that the majority of individuals do not feel that scrubs equal professionalism and that patients often equate professionalism with the image of a nurse wearing all white. However, nurses are not ready to surrender their scrubs in exchange for something more traditional and patient- pleasing. "It's not what you wear-- it is what you know and what you do that ultimately makes you professional," one nurse explained. Nurses commented that being able to move around freely, and feeling comfortable and confident in their uniforms are important aspects that go hand-in-hand with the quality of care they provide. Therefore, it looks like scrubs are here to stay for awhile. However, another major reoccurring theme was the challenge associated with identifying nurses in the hospital amongst the sea of other health care workers donning scrubs. Suggestions for improving this challenge and for boosting the professional image of the nurse without going all white were examined in this study.

To answer the question that we set out to answer at the beginning, have the ubiquitous scrubs adversely affected the image of nursing? Some may argue that they have, while others may say they have allowed nurses to become more independent, performing a wider variety of tasks.