

What is a nurse?

I recently found a box at the back of my wardrobe, probably the type of box most of us have unless you have kept up your Marie Kondo New Year's resolutions, something I clearly have not. I call it my 'Box of Delights' as it's full of treasures from my past, but in truth it contains many things that I occasionally look at and then put back in my wardrobe for another few years. However, this time it took me on a wonderful fifteen-minute trip down memory lane and back to my nursing past. I found nearly every name badge I've had since 1994. This was my opportunity to time travel back down the white tiled, disinfected corridors of Victorian hospitals where I learnt how to be a nurse, through new builds that did not stay new and shiny for long and memories of both summer and winter under and over air-conditioned nightshifts. It is fascinating how a plastic name badge can create such nostalgia and bring back reflections and memories of people, places, sadness, joy and progression. I was quite amazed by how many titles I've collected over my career to date; Staff Nurse, Nursing Team Leader, Practice Development Nurse, Charge Nurse, Ward Manager, Site Nurse Practitioner, Senior Nurse. It was an exciting short roller-coaster ride piecing together my nursing journey and gave me time to consider how it's influenced my nursing future to date.

There has been a lot of discussion of late around titles in nursing. We know, the term Registered Nurse is protected by law and can only be used legally in the United Kingdom by those of us with NMC registration (The Nursing and Midwifery Order, 2001), The term "Nurse" however is not protected and can in effect be used by anyone. A movement has started to seek protection for the title 'Nurse' in order to safeguard our profession and most importantly uphold patient and public safety. Many of you, may refer to yourselves as Nurses, I rarely introduce myself with the Registered Nurse tag. Most of my titles have contained the word Nurse, although interestingly only one of my name badges actually says Registered Nurse and that was when I worked outside of the United Kingdom many years ago.

I'm not here to debate titles, but I do want to consider what a (Registered) Nurse really is. When my nursing journey started in the early nineties my goal was to be an emergency department (ED) nurse, a goal I quickly reached and emergency medicine has been at the centre of my career ever since. In the early stages of my career I could not even start to comprehend any alternative to this. Why on earth would anyone not want to be an ED nurse? But as my nursing career matured so did my thinking. I learnt that there was so much more to a hospital than its front door and the nurses in ED were just one cog in a very extensive healthcare machine.

Over the last two decades my previous narrow views on who my fellow Nurses are have considerably widened and been challenged. Nurses don't just look after sick people and patch them up when they break. Healthcare so clearly isn't only about hospitals. Its far bigger than that. Being a Nurse is dynamic and many of the outdated nursing stereotypes have been left in the past

Nurses can be found in many places; in a hospital, in the community, in a prison, in a school, in call centres; the list is endless. Nursing and healthcare is diversifying and nurses are driving this forward.

Whenever nurses work outside of somewhere you would traditionally expect to find them there is usually some discussion attached to it. I've been working in nurse education for ten years and I describe myself to people as a nurse who works in a university, this often takes some explaining. I get all the usual responses; 'Do you miss real nursing?' 'Why did you leave nursing?', 'How can you keep up your NMC registration?' 'Do you do shifts so you can revalidate?' I am not alone in this curious questioning. Colleagues and friends of mine who work in health protection, safeguarding or executive roles get asked similar questions. This demonstrates that my previous outdated views on what a "real Nurse" is are not unique to me - we all have our own preconceived ideas.

As a Nurse at a university, I often challenge peoples perceptions of what a Nurse is. Whether it's in my own field of nursing where I still feel that I have to tell people that being a Nurse in the community is valid and no you don't have to work in a hospital first. To challenging perceptions between fields, mental health and children's nurses is real, valued and specialised nursing.

Nursing is big, it's important and we have to value the huge variety that sits within it, that value must start within. we still have work to do in its modernisation and recognising every Nurse's valuable contribution to healthcare. We need to refresh and update our internal visions of nursing to move this forward. I am looking forward to my nursing future, seeing what will be written on my next name badges, and reminiscing about my nursing past when I next open my "Box of Delights. So next time someone asks you what you do, think about what you say about what nursing is to you and broaden yours and their horizons because a Nurse is a million different things.