

### Confessions of "The Mature Aged Student Nurse"

It has been 27 years since, I as a "mature aged student", embarked on a nursing career.

Helping others had always been in my genes. My great grandmother, although not a trained nurse back in the 1920's and earlier was a "midwife" in her younger years, "birthing" the babies as they said in *Gone with the Wind*. Then in her later years she cared for elderly men, whose lives had taken a sad turn due to the demon alcohol. Back in those days we did not have the programs and care that we have today. In fact alcoholism wasn't classified as a disease until the 1950's.

My great aunt had also been called to serve and care for others in the Salvation Army, travelling around the country helping wherever she could.

My mother had thought she would make a good nurse if only she could stand the sight of blood. She did join the Junior Red Cross during her younger years, because she liked the uniform.

As a primary school girl, I also joined the Junior Red Cross and was a first aider at school, looking after injured school mates. I doubt that would happen today in this litigious world we live in.

I can also remember many happy times when my dolls and bears became patients whom I attended to in my nurse's uniform with medicine made from coloured water in tiny empty lolly bottles.

In high school, I dreamed of possibly becoming a nurse, but sadly I left school early to embark on a customer service position, where I met my husband and had two beautiful daughters. I still dreamed of doing something more and nursing was still in the back of my mind. Of course back then nursing training was in the hospitals and compulsory living in was not an option for me being married with children. So my dreams disappeared. With changes in education and governments, time came to review the way nurses were trained and so in 1985 nursing was to go from a "trade" to a "profession" and university courses commenced. Three years after the first tertiary trained nurses were graduating, at the ripe old age of 32, I started studying to become a registered nurse. My dream was about to become a reality.

Friends thought me mad, I often thought myself mad, as I studied after the family was asleep. Working at 3 or 4 different jobs, managing the house and trying to remember where I was supposed to be on which day became my way of life.

I look back now and wonder how I had the energy to keep it up. Until I started nursing, I had lead a fairly sheltered life, with no real appreciation for what nurses really do.

My first nursing role was in a small private hospital as an AIN, which had three wards – rehabilitation, palliative and a nursing home section. It was quite a wakeup call for me, when on my first shift in the palliative care unit; I had my first patient die. Unlike the young boy Cole in *The Sixth Sense*, I had never seen a dead person before, so I held my breath and followed instructions on how to care for the dead. It was an amazing experience, preparing this person who I had never even met before so that their family could come and say goodbye. She was one of many who I would care for during my years working as a student nurse.

The hospital had a certain smell, and to this day when I smell something similar it takes me back. I learned a lot about people working there.

I have always enjoyed talking to people so when working in the palliative and rehabilitation units, there were plenty of opportunities when assisting the patients, whether it was mobilising or helping them take a shower. Talking to people and making them feel comfortable is a major part of being a nurse, and one that needs to be remembered. It is also one that cannot be taught, it is an innate quality that is vital in nursing and caring for people. My great grandmother had this quality and had she been born into a different family she may have had the opportunity to become a “real” nurse. My mother has this quality, being interested and caring for people.

My nursing training probably took a little longer than most as I started part time, but it gave me many opportunities to gain experience in a variety of areas. One of my other jobs was working for a nursing agency and going into people’s homes. Mainly at night to assist with palliative care patients in their own homes which allowed the families an opportunity to get some rest. Of course not everyone could afford to pay me for the entire night. There were many times when I would be letting myself out of someone’s house at five am in the morning, trying not to wake them, before heading home to get a few hours sleep before having to face the day and my own family.

Sometimes I would just sit with a palliative patient for the afternoon, trying to make conversation and steer clear of the fact that they were dying. Spending that precious time with a stranger in their home is an unusual experience.

I was also lucky enough to get a part time job at a large public hospital, where I was able to work in almost every department, gaining experience while I continued my studies.

Surprisingly, it was much easier just working on the wards, being run off my feet, than sitting with someone for hours.

During one shift in a medical ward, one of the regular patients had been admitted through A & E and had just arrived on our ward. She was sitting up in the bed and waved to everyone as she passed by. The nurse caring for her settled her into her room and then came out to call her family to let them know that she was okay and that they could come in to see her. When she headed back in to the room to do her fifteen minute observations,- the patient had died. This was my first patient that I had seen alive not long before they passed away. Though I was not sure whether I felt fear or shock when the family arrived not long after the discovery, it was soon was gone, as we cared for the family and washed and prepared the patient.

Becoming a nurse was such a wonderful learning experience, even for someone who had given birth twice, I had no idea how much could go wrong with a pregnancy. My stint in the maternity wards at two hospitals remains in my memory. At the first, I sat with parents whose baby was in the neo natal unit fighting for his life. To this day I often wonder what happened to that baby and his mum and dad. Children shouldn’t die and as a mother I found this the hardest to deal with. Tiny babies struggling to stay alive have more strength than many adults. Luckily there have been so many advances in antenatal and neonatal care.

The haematology ward was one I worked at frequently as both student in placements and also as an undergraduate nurse. During that time I met a family who I came to know. Not unlike mine husband, wife and two daughters. The wife had leukaemia. For a long time she battled and it seemed like she was doing well, until the night I came in and she had been through a bone marrow transplant and

treatment. She was painfully thin, her face and mouth were ulcerated, and yet she was so grateful to the doctors and staff who were looking after her. I asked myself would I be so grateful if I was in that condition. Sadly she didn't survive much longer.

As a mature aged student with a family you see your patients through different eyes. You can empathise with the parent whose child is sick. It's not just the patient being treated and cared for but also the parents. I can remember looking after a woman who was only a year or two older than me. She had been at work one morning when she suddenly developed a terrible headache and then collapsed. She had a cerebral vascular accident, and was transported from west of the mountains by helicopter. She was 40, had a family and had no idea that on that fateful morning her life would change forever. When I first met her she was semi conscious and had a tape across her head which read "no bone" I had never seen this before. I was fascinated by the fact that her piece of skull was now being kept until the swelling was reduced. This amazing piece of surgery had saved her life.

Caring for those who are vulnerable and cannot care for themselves is such a rewarding job and not everyone has an opportunity to have that experience in their career.

For many years I have worked in industry away from hospitals first as an occupational health nurse, and then as an OHS professional, but the thrill of nursing has never left me. I have continued my professional development and always kept my registration. Being a nurse has helped immensely with both first aid and injury management in the workplace.

I am always asked why choose Occupational Health?

As a student, a lecturer spoke about preventative medicine and those words stayed in my memory "It is much easier to save people before they fall into the river than save them as they fall over the waterfall". Working in safety has given me the opportunity to help in preventing accidents and also assist people in managing injuries and returning to work. In all of the companies I have worked whenever the staff discovered that I was a nurse, they were always much more relaxed and engaged. Nursing as a profession is a trusted one and I am thankful that I had the opportunity to become a nurse. Dreams can come true

So now I am working once again in a hospital after so many years (as a safety professional) but I feel like I have come home.