Correlating care, theory and practice

ACU National’s first Head of the School of Nursing (NSW), Sister Paulina Pilkington, a Sister of Charity, was awarded membership within the Order of Australia in 1990 and was made a Distinguished Life Fellow of the Royal College of Nursing in 2001.

She recalls mixed attitudes when nurse training was moved from hospitals to tertiary institutions in the 1980s.

“The fact that nursing was coming into colleges was seen as downgrading the academic standing of the colleges, but we proved them wrong,” Sister Paulina said.

“The reason we changed to colleges wasn’t to have a piece of paper to give us an academic qualification. It was to allow us to understand better why we did the things we did, to correlate theory and practice.”

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Sister Paulina was in charge of the St Vincent’s Hospital nurse training schools in Melbourne from 1957 to 1963, and then in Sydney from 1963. She was appointed Chief Nurse, Australia, for the Department of Health in Canberra in 1975, an appointment she held for seven years.

She was pursuing a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the School of Nursing, University of California, San Francisco in late 1982 and working as a consultant with the World Health Organisation when she was appointed Foundation Head, Division of Nurse Education, Catholic College of Education, Sydney until 1987, one of the predecessor colleges of ACU National.

Sister Paulina said she was glad to see the dismantling of the practice of trainee nurses living in hospitals. “Nurses’ homes continued the dependence of women,” she said. “Young women came in from the country to nursing, and weren’t able to rub shoulders with the world out there.”

Sister Paulina is quick to praise her leadership team of Professor Judy Lumby, now Executive Director of the College of Nursing, and Lesley Wilkes, Professor of Nursing (Research) and Acting Dean of the College of Social and Health Sciences at the University of Western Sydney.

These days, ACU National’s Faculty of Health Sciences caters for nearly 3,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students, with Schools of Nursing at North Sydney (MacKillop), Melbourne (St Patrick’s), Ballarat (Aquinas) and Brisbane (McAuley at Banyo) campuses, all with sophisticated nursing laboratories with simulated wards and other specialised areas where students can practice their nursing skills.

Students learn and practice nursing skills on technologically advanced mannequins, including paediatric mannequins which can be programmed for different clinical scenarios by setting the heart beat, respirations and lung sounds, blood pressure and other body sounds.

They can also make verbal noises such as coughing, groaning, screaming and saying “yes” and “no” which can be altered via remote control.

Every week, the mannequin “patients” are assigned a case history based on a real clinical scenario. Students of nursing at North Sydney prepare themselves for the practical session in the nursing laboratory by logging on to the interactive Virtual Health Environment (VHE) beforehand. Based on a dummy medical system in liaison with St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney, the VHE enables students to access patient information, identify areas for further investigation, and research databases to support medical and nursing interventions.

As the week progresses in the simulated ward, the health of the “patients” varies just like a real patient. Students nurse the “patient” using up-to-date equipment such as the latest ECG machines, BSL monitors, hydraulic hoists, pneumatic underlays, pulse oximeters and oxygen (compressed air) and suction outlets built in to bed sites.

At the Brisbane Campus, interactive CD ROM, internet access and a locally developed virtual community complement the bedside laboratory strategies. The laboratory at Brisbane also has a range of texts and videos available for student use.

The thorough training in the nursing laboratories at ACU National equips students for life on a real ward, so that when they go to their first clinical placement they find they are well-prepared. ACU National nursing graduates are highly valued.

More information is available at www.acu.edu.au/ nursin g.