**Does academic cheating by student nurses undermine the moral integrity of the nursing profession?**

Emeritus Professor Alan Glasper, from the University of Southampton, discusses the recent worrying media reports which suggest that large numbers of student nurses are cheating their way onto the professional register.

**Introduction**

In July 2016 broadsheet newspapers such as The Telegraph ran a series of high profile headlines which suggested that significant numbers of student nurse were entering the professional nursing register after committing braches of academic integrity. With headlines such as “*Thousands of student nurses cheating their way through training”* it is of concern that the prestigious reputation of nursing should be tarnished and brought into dispute.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/19/thousands-of-student-nurses-cheating-their-way-through-training/>

**Background**

In 1854 when Florence Nightingale took her 38 nurses to the military hospital which had been established at the outset of the Crimean war on the island of Scutari near Istanbul in the Bosporus ,little did she know that six years later she would establish the Nightingale school of nursing at St Thomas’s Hospital in London.

Prior to that date nurses had a poor reputation in the eyes of the public, perhaps exemplified by Charles Dickens characterisation of a drunken and patient abusing nurse with low morals, named Sarah Gamp, from his novel Martin Chuzzlewit (1999) first published in 1844.

Such was the power of this character that it was to be many years before his negative stereotypical image of nurses changed, and still today many see Dickens caricature as an accurate portrayal of pre nightingale nursing. At the outset of the Crimean war as Nightingale herself was preparing to set sail with her nurses for Turkey, Summers (1989) cites one of the Victorian campaigners for nursing reform who movingly said *“let it cease to be a disgrace to be called a nurse”.* Nightingale set about trying to improve the status of nursing in this climate of nursing negativity by seeking to change the perception of the public. In this context she was spectacularly successful and “the lady with the lamp “as she became known after her exploits in the Crimea soon became the new face of the nursing profession. Raferty (1995) encapsulates Nightingales vison for nursing as one that was based on a calling or vocation although later nurse leaders such as Bedford Fenwick the architect of the current UK regulatory body for nurses and midwives sought to change this image for one based on scientific enquiry. Similarly Brookes and Rafferty (2007) considers the role of the nursing uniform and how central it became to the concept of the nurse as pure and clean. This new nursing uniform was designed by nurse reformers to obliterate the public’s memory of the Sarah Gamp and to provide a common identity for a new profession arising like a phoenix from the shadows of Dickens imagination.



Fig 1 Victorian Nurse in uniform

**Nightingales vison for moralistic nursing.**

Nightingale had much opposition when setting up the school of nursing at St Thomas’s hospital and Baly (1995) describes how she insisted that all of the student nurses must be above reproach. It was for this reason that the first 15 students were carefully selected after the application of stringent vetting processes. The selected few were intended to be missionaries to spread the new gospel of nursing far and wide, and where character formation and morality were foremost in the training process. To attain these primary objectives of nursing education combined with high moral standing the students were accommodated on a separate floor the hospital and this nurse’s home became a template for other training schemes as they were rolled out across the country. Although Nightingales concept of the nurse’s home was rooted in preserving the moral reputation of the student nurses, she herself did not believe that nursing was a religious vocation and instead wished to attract to the emerging profession intelligent women with the correct aptitude.

The nurse’s home concept grew and became commonplace with every training hospital acquiring or building one within their grounds. Undoubtedly many readers will fondly remember living as students in nurse’s homes all over the country and some will reminisce and tell tales of eluding the attentions of the home sisters who were appointed to safeguard the morality of the students. Late night passes could only be issued by the home sisters and in the absence of a pass many student nurses learned to climb drain pipes or trees to access windows in the nurses home. Matrons and senior nurses of those days operated in *loco parentis*, and were aware of their legal responsibility to the student nurses and cadets (some of whom were only 16 years of age) in taking on the role of a parent.

**Contemporary nurse training**

Although there are still nurse’s homes in some hospitals many have long since vanished and todays undergraduate student nurses live in University accommodation, their own homes or in private rented accommodation. Importantly no longer are the majority of student nurses school leavers, as many of today’s students are mature people often with families of their own and with an average age of 29, many who have already graduated with non-nursing degrees or have pervious work experience. (Ford 2011 http://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/nurse-educators/plans-for-new-student-nurse-bursary-system-revealed/5032761.fullarticle)

In order to become a registered nurse, all students undergo a programme of study in an accredited educational institute, usually a university which is approved by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)

Throughout the UK this involves completing a degree level programme, available form a range of institutions in one of four fields of practice, i.e. adult nursing, children’s nursing, learning disabilities nursing or mental health nursing. In the context of this latest revelation of cheating by students the Successful completion of the undergraduate programme leads to an academic award of at least the level of a Batchelor’s degree and professional registration as a first level nurse. The NMC who approve the courses insist that all l pre-registration courses must be three years long and comprise 4,600 hours in length, divided between 50 per cent theory and 50 per cent clinical practice in a range of acute and primary care settings. Most universities use a wide variety of student assessments to ensure compliance with the NMC requirements

Following the creation of the nursing register in 1919 entry to the profession was predicated on the successful passing of unseen state examinations. These commenced in July 1924 and were operated by the General Nursing Council the forerunner of today’s Nursing and Midwifery Council. (BJN1923)

http://www2.rcn.org.uk/development/rcn\_archives/historical\_nursing\_journals/browse\_journals?sq\_content\_src=%2BdXJsPWh0dHAlM0ElMkYlMkZyY25hcmNoaXZlLnJjbi5vcmcudWslMkZkYXRhJTJGVk9MVU1FMDcxLTE5MjMlMkZwYWdlMzc2LXZvbHVtZTcxLTE1dGhkZWNlbWJlcjE5MjMucGRmJmFsbD0x

**The NMC regulations for course approvals and student nurse assessments.**

Following the cessation of the state examination system the nursing regulator in this case the NMC has developed a series of sophisticated systems to ensure that student nurses are fit for practice, fit for purpose and fit for the academic award. These systems include the production of detailed educational standards for preregistration training (NMC 2016)

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/additional-standards/standards-for-pre-registration-nursing-education/>

where all students following the approved programmes are required to meet these standards before registration and importantly detailed standards to support the leaning and assessment of student nurses in in practice settings

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/additional-standards/standards-to-support-learning-and-assessment-in-practice/>

Within these detailed standards are specific standards related to the assessment of students where the NMC expect accredited educational institution to ensure that a variety of assessments are used to test the acquisition of the prescribed programme outcomes. Some institutions for example use objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) to assess nursing students, and Rushforth (2007) believes that when used carefully these practical assessments be successfully used to assess knowledge and competence in nursing students

The NMC expect the institution to include at least one unseen invigilated examination in the assessment processes and where theoretical achievements cannot be used as compensation for poor practice assessment. Importantly the NMC expect that there is equal weighting in the assessment of practice and theory and that both are equitable in contributing to the final award leading to registration.

For the assessment of practice the NMC are well aware that the strength of any nursing programme is only as good as the mentor who delivers it and it is for this reason that all programmes have sufficient numbers of qualified mentors to support the students in the practice areas. Both of these sets of standards have been formulated primarily to protect the public and the NMC are insistent that institutions which provide their nursing programmes must ensure that no student’s activity either theoretically or practically puts a service user at risk. Hence all programme providers must have systems in place to safeguard service users during any student learning activities. This includes having a robust system for identifying and addressing any concerns about the conduct of any student in training. Cheating of any type should trigger a fitness to practice investigation by the institution.

During any approval of a programme that leads to registration or during a periodic review of the programme provider, NMC appointed reviewers who act as officers for the regulator subject the programmes and the systems that underpin them to significant and detailed scrutiny. Programmes are only approved when all of the NMC standards are fully met including the fitness for practice procedures operated by the institution.

**Procedures employed for detecting for breaches of academic integrity**

The NMC guide for students of nursing and midwifery clearly states that they are not accountable for their actions or omissions although the regulator does point out that student’s may be called to account by the university or the law.

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/education/becoming-a-nurse-or-midwife/when-studying-to-be-a-nurse-or-midwife/guidance-for-students/>

It is for this reason that the NMC expects the educational institutions to act on their behalf in maintaining the academic integrity of the nursing courses being offered that lead to registration and all must provide evidence that they have fitness to practice committees. The NMC expect the institution to call a student to account if their behavior or competence gives rise to concern about their overall suitability to join the nursing register.

The NMC guide for student nurses specifically discusses Cheating or plagiarising and this includes

• cheating in examinations, coursework, clinical assessment or record books

• forging a mentor or tutor’s name or signature on clinical assessments or record books

• passing off other people’s work as your own

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/education/becoming-a-nurse-or-midwife/when-studying-to-be-a-nurse-or-midwife/guidance-for-students/>

It is the issue of cheating which has precipitated that the current scandal involving student nurses.

**Discussion -What is the scale of cheating among student nurses?**

The news that 1,700 students nurses have been found to be cheating by their host universities over the past three years highlights the growing problem of [plagiarism](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11532848/1700-for-a-dissertation-but-whats-the-real-cost-of-plagiarism.html) and other forms of cheating including the submission of academic work purchased by student nurses from dedicated health care [plagiarism](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11532848/1700-for-a-dissertation-but-whats-the-real-cost-of-plagiarism.html) websites. The newspaper headlines suggest that student nurses are more likely to resort to cheating than other university students with for example the University of Dundee reporting that nearly half of the students disciplined between 2010 and 2013 were nurses.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/19/thousands-of-student-nurses-cheating-their-way-through-training/>

However it is clear that the academic institutions concerned do have polices and procedures in place to ensure that student nurses have passed all parts of their courses legitimately before they are put forward for registration.

Academic cheating does not only concern nursing students, and in January 2016 the Times newspaper reported that British universities were experiencing a plagiarism epidemic pertinent to 50,000 students over a three year period

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article4654719.ece>

On closer examination although 1,700 nursing students were found guilty of breaches of academic integrity over a three year period, in context data from the Royal College of Nursing shows that over the same time period educational institutions trained approximately 64,000 nurses. With only about 2.6% of these student nurses committing acts of cheating it can be postulated that the institutions concerned have robust systems for weeding out the cheats.

<https://www2.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/518376/004446.pdf>

Despite this, any negative reports of the academic activities of student nurses does inevitably impinge on publics perceptions of nurses, perhaps in the same way as those which followed the fictional accounts of nurse Sarah Gamp in the middle of the 19th century!

Importantly it should be recognized that the vast majority of student nurses are a credit to their future profession.

**Key points**

* Recent newspaper headlines have shown that many student nurses have been found guilty of attempting to cheat their way onto the NMC register.
* At the dawn of the development of the nursing profession Florence Nightingale endeavoured to ensure that character formation and morality were foremost in the training process of students.
* When state examinations for nurses were abandoned the nursing regulator developed a series of sophisticated systems to ensure that student nurses continued to be fit for practice.
* Despite the banner headlines in reality the vast majority of student nurses do not resort to cheating.

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