

Pat Allen

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THE NEW NURSE

BYE-BYE BEDPANS . . .

TODAY'S NURSING STUDENTS
HAVE A WIDE VARIETY OF OPTIONS,
INCLUDING PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENCE

by STACI ELDER

In 1989, when Samantha Strothmann first heard that NBC-TV would be airing a dramatic series focused on nursing students, she couldn't wait to see it.

But when Strothmann, then a junior in the University of Oklahoma College of Nursing, watched her first episode of the series "Nightingales," anticipation turned to outrage.

Instead of seeing hard work, hours of study and clinical rotations and stories about serious students learning how to care for the sick, Strothmann viewed a show in which the students showed up when they felt like it, never spent any time in class and abandoned seriously ill patients for romantic romps in the linen closet.

But where the nursing student of yesterday might have "grinned and ignored it," Strothmann went into action. She and several student colleagues, all members of the Oklahoma Student Nurses Association, drafted a resolution protesting the portrayal of nursing students on the show, a resolution that the National Student Nurses Association incorporated into its own formal protest. Then Strothmann went on to organize a successful letter-writing campaign that contributed to the withdrawal of most of "Nightingales" sponsors. The show soon disappeared.

Strothmann represents a growing number of assertive, savvy and politically active nursing students who tend to be far less passive than their earlier colleagues. Students like Strothmann also reflect critical changes in the profession of nursing as a whole, as it moves from its long outdated

"doctor's handmaid" image to that of college degreeed professionals whose practitioners are qualified to counsel and minister to patients independently or in collaboration with other health care providers.

That change is both encouraged by and reflected in college nursing programs such as the one at OU, in which more and more faculty hold Ph.D. degrees. These changes in education, in the opinion of Nursing Dean Patricia R. Forni, also have been accelerated by the widely publicized nursing shortage of the 1980s.

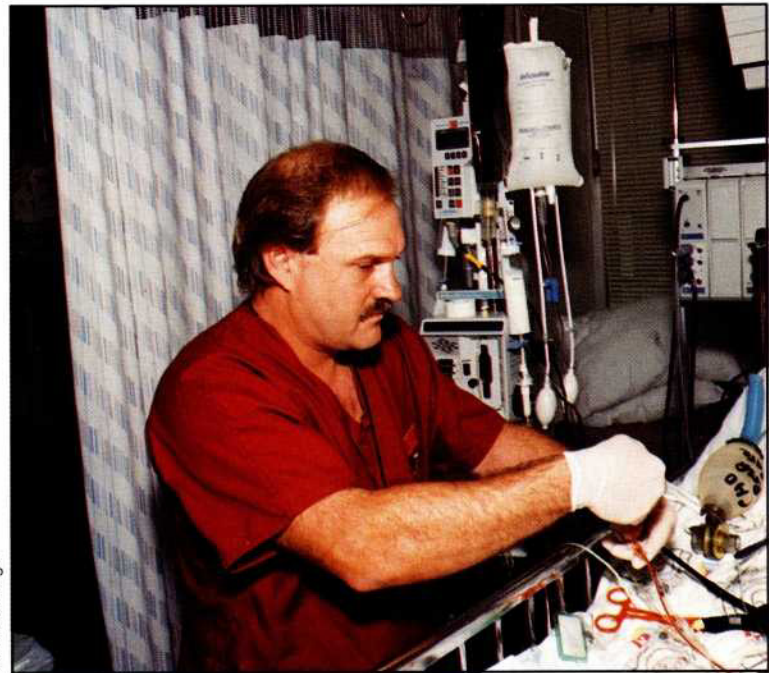
From its humble beginnings in 1911 as a two-year School of Nursing under the umbrella of OU's College of Medicine and through its metamorphosis into a full-fledged college in 1971, the OU nursing program today is consistent with the latest trends in nursing education. Several degree options are offered, including a bachelor of science in nursing, a master of science with a nursing major and accelerated tracks for practicing registered nurses to obtain both of these degrees.

A satellite master's program also is in place in Tulsa that utilizes a new compressed video transmitting capability to broadcast courses between the University Center at Tulsa and the OU College of Nursing in Oklahoma City. A Ph.D. program is expected to be added to the college in the future.

One of the most rapidly growing options within the college, Forni notes, is aimed specifically at practicing nurses who hold either hospital diplomas or two-year associate degrees and, for career reasons, wish to go on to complete their BSN

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OPPOSITE PAGE: An OU nursing student learning sepsis procedures struggles into sterile gown and gloves.

AT LEFT: Junior nursing students Teri Murphy, left, and Christi Dining listen as their professor, Virginia Hiebert, guides their class through the first day of clinical orientation.

ABOVE: Nursing senior Larry Mekush adjusts an intravenous tube for his patient in the pediatric intensive care unit at Children's Memorial Hospital, a part of Oklahoma Health Center in Oklahoma City.

or MS. The college's Career Ladder Program is tailored individually for these students, allowing them to accelerate their degree completion.

"The thinking behind this program is that it was fairly ridiculous for a practicing nurse who is considering coming back for his or her degree to have to relearn basic nursing skills and procedures," Forni explains. "This program is customized to take prior experience into account but still to give them the education they need to earn full BSN or MS credit."

These new options are particularly crucial since nurses now have a wide variety of work place options. Nurses work not only in hospitals but also in private clinics, county health departments, private industry and for home health care services. With the help of more than \$800,000 from a federal grant, OU's College of Nursing also recently began a Family Nurse Practitioner Program, which is the only one of its kind in the state.

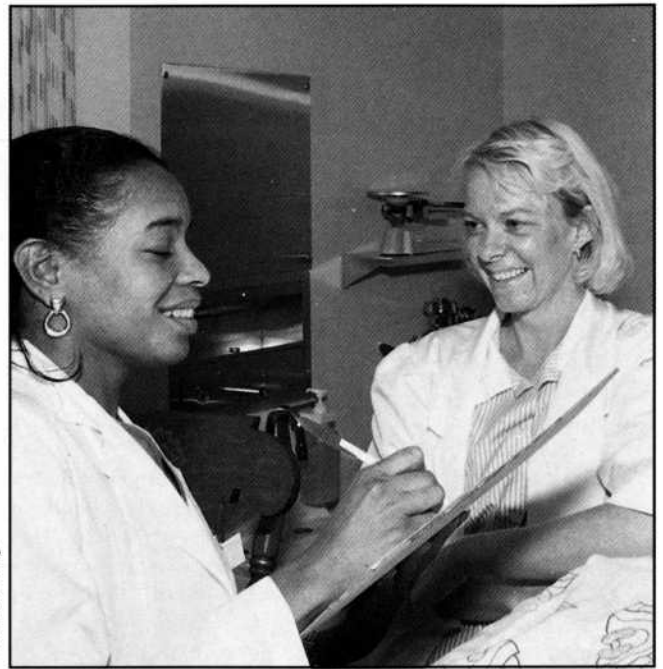
Nurse practitioners are registered nurses who have completed advanced nursing education at the master's degree level and also have specialty preparation in a particular field such as pediatrics, gerontology or family nursing. Within their areas of expertise, they diagnose and treat clients, including prescribing medication and providing primary health care. Due to nurse practitioners' focus on health promotion and early treatment, their care also is more cost effective.

"All across the country, nurse practitioners are proving to be one of the best answers to the growing shortage of basic health care, particularly in the rural areas, of which Oklahoma obviously has many," Forni notes. "The success of our new program will play a key role in the future of health care in the state."

In addition to job flexibility, ethics also are playing an increasing role in nursing education. "Because of the advances in medical technology, people are being kept alive longer, and this creates many ethical issues that we have incorporated into our classes," Forni says. "In fact, we have added a separate elective course on ethics into our master's program."

As the college's programs have changed, so have the applicants. Competition to enter OU's College of Nursing—the largest baccalaureate degree program in the state—is fierce, allowing the faculty to be highly selective in filling the 130-plus student slots available each year.

"We still see a good mix of students, although there are more older students and practicing RNs enrolling," Forni



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TOP: Assistant Professor Maribeth Moran, right, checks out senior nursing student Katherine French on ICU monitors.

BOTTOM: OU graduate nursing students who are following the nurse practitioner pathway observe their classmate Janice Parker, center, making a physical assessment of a patient under the watchful eye of Assistant Professor Deborah Booton.

OPPOSITE TOP: Nursing senior Alicia Breath checks the vital signs of a 2-year-old patient in Children's Memorial Hospital.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Dean Patricia R. Forni directs a College of Nursing that is producing graduates who are skilled, caring, articulate and assertive health professionals.

says. "One definite change is that the younger students are much more knowledgeable about job security and the overall economic situation. They are very adamant in seeking careers in which they will have security, and nursing is one of these careers right now.

"At the same time," she adds, "We are seeing a resurgence of students who have the strong desire to care for people, which has traditionally been associated with those who enter nursing. This is very welcome, as well, because the two qualities of caring and assertiveness make a good combination in the modern nurse."

In fact, Forni is pleased that the college's faculty actively prepare students to be "movers and shakers" in the profession. "This is part of the reason behind having baccalaureate-educated nurses," she says. "We teach our students to be articulate, to stand up for themselves in the work environment and to maintain a high level of clinical skill. We attempt to make them assertive and informed about broad health care issues. This also ties into the movement by national nursing organizations to develop health care policy."

One acid test of how the profession is changing is the fact that more and more men are enrolling in nursing colleges. "For the most part, these men aren't 18- to 20-year-olds fresh out of high school," Forni says. "Males make up about 12 percent of nursing students nationally, and many of them are military veterans, have experience as emergency medical technicians or have held other jobs in the health care field.

"Men, as well as women, are figuring out that nursing salaries are fairly high, that there is both job security and geographic freedom in the profession because of the high demand for nurses and that becoming a nurse doesn't necessarily mean working in a hospital setting," she adds. "In fact, nurse practitioners and nurse anesthetists often can open their own businesses—particularly in a rural area—and this is a very appealing option."

If Forni could change one thing, it would be the continuing public ignorance of the different levels and types of nurses.

"A 'male nurse' isn't really a surprise to anyone any more, but people still think that a nurse is a nurse is a nurse," she says. "But the fact is that nurses have moved away from the 'apprentice' background established by hospital training programs. There now are diploma nurses, associate degreed nurses, BSNs, MSNs, Ph.D.s, nurse practitioners, etc.—all with different levels of ability. And every single nurse is capable of, and is doing far more than, the traditional handing-out-pills and emptying-bedpans stereotype."

One way to change this misperception might be a revised "Nightingales"—one both Forni and Samantha Strothmann could watch with pride.

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