Nursing uniforms: Professional symbol or outdated relic?

Despite controversy, the nursing uniform reflects the profession in a positive light and is preferred by patients and nurses.

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The nursing uniform has long been a source of struggle between group identity and individuality, and management and staff. Some argue that the uniform is simply an outdated relic of history, while others see it as essential to professional respect and patient satisfaction. (See “A time capsule of uniforms.”) While the first view has its merits, the second view is undoubtedly the more popular opinion. No matter how much we want to believe that education and experience determine a patient’s satisfaction...
with care, we can’t ignore that our attire creates a first impression, and first impressions count.

**Distinguished correlations**
Research demonstrates a positive association between wearing a uniform and professionalism. Uniforms are noted to have correlations with status and power, infection control, identity, modesty, symbolism, and occupational health and safety. These qualities have been chiefly reported in nursing, law enforcement, and the military.

Nurses often say they want to be recognized for their knowledge, competence, and experience, not for what they’re wearing. However, this is in direct opposition to a patient’s need to identify and relate to his or her caregiver as someone who’s competent and professional.\(^2\)

**Keep tradition over trends**
Nursing uniforms were initially developed to instill a sense of power within the profession. But in today’s healthcare environment, what reflects power has shifted, causing nurse executives to step out of the uniform and into business attire.\(^1\) Given this trend, should we empower our staff by taking them out of uniform? How would our patients feel about being cared for by a nurse in, for example, street clothes with a lab coat instead of a uniform? It’s important to consider that patients may gain a sense of security when seeing someone in uniform. They can easily identify who can help them, and in what capacity. This would negate any increase in a nurse’s power.

Some believe that instead of creating power, the uniform creates distance between the patient and the nurse. Researchers speculate that a nurse in uniform may encourage patients to lie back and let the nurse do everything for them, which might hinder their recovery.\(^3\) On the other hand, this distancing may make patients feel more comfortable in revealing their innermost feelings and healthcare details, as well as exposing themselves physically.

**Pros and cons**
Nurses prefer to wear uniforms because they associate them with...
such themes as power and control, separation from work and play, membership in a powerful group, place in the hierarchy, convenience, economics, and assistance with doing difficult things easily. That’s not to say nurses love their uniforms. They cite several negative aspects, including lack of individuality, barriers between nurses and patients, impracticality, and the fostering of the sick role. Nonetheless, wearing a uniform is still a large part of being a nurse in an acute care setting, and nurses aren’t prepared to give them up.

The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, Pa., with the help of the *American Journal of Nursing*, surveyed 908 nurses about the “ideal nursing uniform.” Nurses could choose from the options of a uniform, scrubs, street clothes with a lab coat, or other. Most respondents (63%) preferred scrubs, but wanted to make improvements in terms of fit, fashion, pockets, and durability. Scrubs continue to dominate the nursing profession because of comfort, quality, fashion, and function. They have, however, become so commercialized that nurses can be seen wearing solids, stripes, plaid, cartoons, and any other design or color imaginable. Is this self-expression beneficial to our patients and our nurses?

To answer this question, a survey was conducted that included 1,180 patients, 918 nurses, and 332 administrators in 22 acute care hospitals across the country. Participants were shown pictures of a female nurse in different uniforms that represented current professional dress. These included street clothes with a lab coat, a white dress, a white pantsuit, scrubs, white pants with a scrub top, and a variation of each, including cap and/or stethoscope. Participants were asked to sort through the pictures and indicate the nurse they would most and least like to care for them.

Patients, nurses, and administrators all preferred the nurse with the pants suit and stethoscope. Patients and administrators least preferred the nurse in the colored scrubs, and nurses least preferred the nurse in street clothes with the lab coat.
**Practicality important**

If staff nurses are going to wear uniforms, they must be practical. Nurses routinely lift patients, move equipment, and do lots of walking, bending, and stretching. The fabric of the uniform must not restrict movement, while maintaining the nurse’s modesty.

In terms of color, white has traditionally been associated with cleanliness and sterility. White uniforms give the impression of being cleaner than other clothing. Even though a white uniform needs to be laundered more frequently, however, it’s no cleaner than other colors and isn’t less likely to contribute to cross infection.

Uniforms are part of a larger dress policy that promotes safety. The typical uniform policy includes requirements for footwear, jewelry, and accessories. Nurses are routinely required to wear flat, comfortable footwear so as to prevent injury and provide comfort and support. The policy for jewelry is generally minimal to none, so as to prevent scratching of the patient during interactions and prevent cross contamination. These requirements help in the safe delivery of care as well as safety for the caregiver.

Perhaps most important is the ability of patients and families to pick nurses out of the crowd of hospital staff. In many hospitals, it’s hard to recognize nurses because they’re dressed like everyone else. The uniform that was designed to elevate the profession has become obscured. Where does that leave our patients and our profession?

**Dress for success**

Nurses must dress for success and demonstrate to patients the commitment we have to our profession and the organization in which we choose to work. Nursing uniforms are a nonverbal, conscious statement that nurses have the skills and knowledge to care for others. They include a clear identification of a nurse’s name and title, patients recognize them, and they’re practical and comfortable for everyday use.

Finally, not only does wearing a uniform showcase our pride and talent for what we do, but it’s one less decision we need to make when getting ready for work.

**A time capsule of uniforms**

The nursing uniform can be traced back to religious orders, when nuns and monks wore the uniform of their order or sect when providing nursing care. The earliest reference to uniforms in the nursing literature relates to the Fliedners’ school. In 1836, Theodor and Friederike Fliedner of Germany founded the Kaiserswerth Deaconess Institute’s Nurse Training School. They required a standard uniform for nurses and believed the nurse had to have a respectable and competent outward appearance as both an individual and as a member of a respected occupational group. The Fliedners worked extensively to gain recognition and social respectability for nursing. Through their efforts, nurses not only became recognizable by their dress, but their uniform symbolized caring, professional competence, and above all, unquestionable moral character.

The early Victorian era represented nurses as promiscuous, slovenly, and dishonest, perhaps not surprising given that some nurses were fulfilling community service obligations for the breaking the law. This representation didn’t last long. Florence Nightingale revisited the nursing uniform and brought a military influence. She wanted nurses to be represented as clean and neat, and wanted them to be distinguished more as a “lady” nurse.

White has traditionally been the color of nursing uniforms and dates back to the wearing of white by servants. In the 1900s, nursing magazines were emphasizing all-white uniforms for nurses, but it wasn’t until the 1940s that all hospital nurses wore white.

How does this history affect nursing today? Historical representations of nurses as stereotypes, including the nurse as angel and handmaiden, have been depicted. Therefore, when someone sees a nurse in uniform, he or she incorporates prior judgments and experiences, and responds to the perception of the nurse’s experience, competence, social status, and professionalism based on the uniform.

**REFERENCES**


**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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