

Fashion or Function?

By Amanda Hyslop

August 2007

Archived writing sample. The article text is preserved from the author's original copy.

Are standardized scrub tops and pants for nurses practical?

When I first chose nursing as a career, I remember thinking how great it would be not having to spend hours dressing for work. I could leave superficiality behind and focus on what was important - the patient.

I was vain enough to buy fitted shirts, cross over tops, and hip cargo pants before accepting my first professional RN job. One of my nursing school friends told me her parents bought her a whole new nursing wardrobe as a graduation present.

Unfortunately, both of us had to put our new clothes at the bottom of our drawers. The hospitals we chose as our employers had nursing uniform requirements.

Identification and Expression

There are several reasons hospitals are moving toward standardized scrub tops and pants for nurses.

First, it allows patients to easily recognize their nurse. Interdisciplinary care often makes it difficult for the patient to identify and differentiate the healthcare team. Patients meet a variety of people during their hospital stay ranging from nurses, physicians, pharmacists, respiratory therapists, and lab technicians.

However many nurses oppose uniform requirements. Dress is an opportunity for individual expression. Darleen Chien, RN, med/surg nurse at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP), says:

"Although I see the initiative to appear more professional with uniforms at HUP, I believe it constrains our ability to express our unique qualities on the floor. I think our actions themselves should prove our professionalism. Now that we're getting uniforms, we're all thinking of new ways to express ourselves. It will be all about the accessories from here. We talk about getting patent leather red Mary Jane shoes and fancy earrings."

The Debate on White

On many professional blogs and Internet discussions, nurse views on uniform requirements are mixed. There has been hot debate regarding the resurgence of the traditional white uniform in some hospitals.

On one nursing Website allnurses.com bloggers argue the traditional white uniform enhances the professionalism of nursing. Some say the white uniform is a historic relic representing care, compassion and credibility for the profession. Other bloggers say a white nursing uniform makes it difficult to hide signs of dirt and blood. It is not practical or attractive for the profession, they say.

Sandy Summers, director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, said in a news release in response to the Nov. 14, 2005 publication of an article on the uniform debate in the Chicago Tribune:

"...The white uniform also has the angel image. It harks back at a time when nurses were thought of as spiritual characters who provide emotional comfort - not professionals who save lives. When you are perceived as an angel, people don't have a problem asking you to work 15-hour shifts without a break."

Although many nurses are against nursing uniforms, management often believes returning to a more traditional look will increase patient satisfaction.

They argue patients are constantly looking for signs of competency, authority and professionalism during their hospitalization, and that wearing uniforms is a nonverbal cue enhancing these three attributes.

One study¹ explored patient's perceptions of nurses by the uniforms they wear. Patients were asked to select the uniform they believed best reflected ten characteristics of nurses. Characteristics included caring, confident, approachable, reliable, attentive, cooperative, empathetic, professional, efficient and competent.

The first photo portrayed a nurse in solid royal blue pants, solid blue top and a solid blue jacket. The second photo modeled a nurse in lavender pants, lavender print top and a lavender print jacket. The last photo showed a nurse in white pants, a white top and a white jacket.

Of the 180 surveys evaluated, the white uniform and lavender print uniform were most often selected for 5 out of the 10 characteristics. The solid blue uniform was least often selected for 6 of the 10 characteristics.

The researchers also asked if age contributed to preferences in uniform traits. They found all generational groups chose the nurse in the white uniform as depicting the image of professionalism. However, Generations X and Y and the baby boomers said the second image with the lavender top and print was a "more approachable nursing image."

White vs. Print

Meanwhile, nursing leaders are being pushed to define the image they wish to express to their patients. Do they want nurses to be seen as professional or would they rather have their nursing staff appear to be more approachable? Can a uniform express both?

To reconcile the white versus print debate, Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital has each unit pick a color with the pants being solid and the top of the outfit having a white background with the chosen color in pattern.

Tennessee Christian Medical Center requires nurses to wear white tops and navy blue slacks. Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago gives staff nurses options, i.e., they can wear either white or solid blue pants with a printed or solid color top.

Uniform of the Future

In 2004, Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum, in conjunction with University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, chronologically looked at the evolution of the nursing uniform.

The exhibit included nursing images portrayed in the media such as the angel of mercy, the sex object, the lovelorn looking for romance and the horrible Nurse Ratchett from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

The museum's curators also demonstrated four futuristic visions of the nursing uniform, including Bioterrorism Nurse (ca. 2015) dressed in hazmat gear; Diagnostic Nurse (ca. 2027) equipped with technology to check vital signs with the touch of hand; Post-Apocalyptic Nurse (ca. 2130) wearing salvaged materials; and Intergalactic Nurse (ca. 2206).

Although these uniforms were more fantasy than reality, it raised questions about the development of modern day nursing uniforms. Will the future nursing uniform be a matter of fashion or function?

Amanda Hyslop is an OR nurse at Northwestern Memorial in Chicago.