

*(Editor's note: We take great pride in presenting op-ed pieces written by members of the first graduating class of RNs from the Bachelor of Science Nursing program run by Algonquin College and the University of Ottawa - thus the column's name, "First Class Nursing." The columns will explore health and lifestyle opportunities from a fresh perspective. We hope you enjoy them!)*



### **The Value of a Unique Nurse's Uniform Special to the Observer By: Christine Brannan**

Uniforms have served important purposes throughout history. A uniform can serve to quickly and easily identify members of particular groups and organizations and, within those organizations, the use of various insignia and accoutrements will help to identify specialties and ranks. Uniforms, some very colourful and complex, can be ceremonial and purely for appearance and often will include indications of an organization's history. Alternatively, uniforms may be utilitarian, incorporating materials, pockets, colours and designs based solely on the basis of functionality for a particular purpose.

I believe that it may be beneficial to consider a standardized uniform to be worn by on-duty nurses in hospitals and elsewhere. A uniform unique to nurses would minimize confusion by patients and visitors, and a smart and professional yet comfortable and functional uniform may potentially enhance pride among nursing staff. While I can not hope to specify what such a uniform would be (there are others much more qualified to determine that), a standardized unique nurse's uniform would have some definite requirements. Such a uniform, for example, would have to be unisex in nature, as an ever-increasing number of men are entering the nursing profession and the traditional stiff-peaked nurse's cap definitely would not be suitable in today's nursing environment.

In Europe, scrubs are customarily worn only by nurses and doctors. In many North American hospitals, however, scrubs are much more prolific and are commonly worn by doctors, nurses, technicians, administrators, support staff – virtually anyone and everyone employed in a hospital, except maybe for those in management positions. This frequently leads to confusion on the part of patients, visitors and even other staff about a given person's occupation and responsibilities. The lack of clear visual identification is especially burdensome for patients, many of whom may already be confused due to the administration of medication, the stress of dealing with a medical condition or simply by virtue of being in a strange environment.

Nursing uniforms derive their origins from the late 1800's, and were based on the nun's habit as nuns originally were commonly involved in providing care and comfort and in assisting medical doctors. It is from the nun's habit that evolved the uniform which included the cape and the famous nurse's cap, which can still be found in use today. The uniform of the nurse has evolved with the profession, and may include "warm-up jackets", nurse's lapel watches, specialized footwear and the ubiquitous functional hospital attire known as "scrubs".

In the 1940s, advances in medical science led to the adoption of medical drapes and gowns for operating room uses. Scrubs got their name because it was what surgical personnel wore when they "scrubbed in" on a medical procedure. The original scrubs were white, but by the 1960s had evolved to any shade of green and were referred to, predictably, as "surgical greens," the colour chosen primarily as a way of offsetting the medical staff from the harsh clinical whiteness of the operating room and thereby reducing strain on the eyes. The use of green also reduced the contrast with any blood or other bodily fluids that found its way onto the clothing. By the 1970s, surgical personnel could choose between the astounding selection of green or blue scrubs.

Surgical scrubs are intended to be loose-fitting and comfortable, and to protect the wearers, patients and others from transferring diseases and bacteria, as well as preventing the staining of personal clothing. Modern scrubs come in long- and short-sleeve, and are available in V-neck, notched-neck or mock-wrap styles. They come in an almost endless variety of colours and patterns, including floral, Hawaiian, polka dots and cartoon characters, allowing medical professionals to express their personalities while dressing in appropriate and sterile attire.

Some hospitals use the colour of scrubs to identify which medical department a person belongs to. For instance, one study suggests that paediatric departments wear scrubs with cartoon characters and bright, cheery colours while surgical departments prefer the more traditional solid green or blue. Personnel on a maternity ward may wear pink scrubs, while intensive care staff may opt for the sterile, professional look of traditional white.

Any potential uniform must also be comfortable and highly durable, as it must be worn on long, often arduous shifts. It should also be somewhat "disposable", as nurses change their clothes often to prevent the spreading of infections. Regardless of the minimum requirements, there can be no doubt that modern fashion and fabric technology would make many options available. For instance, the military uses patches to identify a person's particular trade, special qualifications and rank level, and there's no reason why a similar concept could not be incorporated into a nurse's uniform. A standardized uniform could be made available in different colours with some aspect of the uniform, such as the collar, for instance, to identify the department in which the nurse works. The possibilities, almost literally, are endless!