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Uniformity

Carly Stewart

A hospital can be, without doubt, the most overwhelming place on Earth, not because of the astringently clean setting, or the morbid atmosphere, but because it is sometimes impossible to find whom you're looking for. I know this from my personal experience working at a hospital; I can't tell nurses from doctors, doctors from technicians, technicians from kitchen staff. I see a man in khaki carpenter shorts and an oxford button-down with a nametag that reads Dr. So and So. And I almost asked if he were looking for the elevator! Hospitals do have uniform rules, but they are extremely generic and weakly enforced. Comfort is key, as is practicality. Doctors and nurses alike don "scrubs" of every color, white lab coats, and sneakers.

But hospitals weren't always this way; years ago only doctors were permitted to wear the lab coats, and nurses strictly wore the white dress, stockings, the little cap. The dress code contributed, either directly or indirectly, to a type of hospital hierarchy. Years of medical schooling earned one a more respectful position than a six month internship. But all in all, it was easy to distinguish the worker you were seeking.

A number of reasons caused this change. At the top of the list were the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies. While women were trying to be accepted as equals, nurses were dressed all in white, looking weak, inferior, and “girly.” (This did not mesh well with those women who were burning bras!) Furthermore, the nurse outfit during this time was becoming a tool of *Playboy*. The little “Naughty Nurse” was a new sex symbol (think about it – you’ve never seen a pornographic nurse wearing scrubs). Like the airline stewardesses of the day, nurses, and many other feminists pushed for more liberal dress restrictions.

Scrubs became popular for men and women in the eighties for one reason only: they were practical. They stood up well to tough stains (TOUGH stains – it’s a hospital) and they were easy to maneuver in; some hospital tasks such as lifting bodies and performing CPR, involve great physical strength. Also, many employees serve 12 and 13 hour shifts through the night, so scrubs were just ideal.

Another reason for the disappearance of the uniform is the disappearance of nurses themselves. The shortage of nurses in American hospitals today is truly frightening. We are fast approaching the age when baby boomers will be needing medical attention, maybe moving into assisted living

facilities. And who will be there for them? The doctors cannot attend to all of them and still have time to perform their own jobs. And besides, much of the care is needed outside of the hospital. I'd venture to say there are just as many nurses working independent of hospital as there are those employed by them. People are desperate for nurses. Ads appear regularly in local and foreign newspapers offering employment in the New York City for nurses. My dad told me if I want a seriously secure job I should become a nurse. They don't need to spend years in medical school, they can start work right out of college, and they can find work in any city in America. So what is the reason behind the shortage? From what I've noticed, nurses are extremely underappreciated! Many patients treat them as though they were merely babysitters. They do as much work as physicians, if not more, but they don't receive nearly as much salary. (Some more established nurses, however, hold well-paying positions.)

Many hospitals try to hide their lack of nurses by encouraging a single style of uniform. The higher ups assume clients will be satisfied to see a mass of uniformed employees, even if they are unaware of the lack of staffing. It goes to show how commercial even hospitals have become; it's always about selling an image.

New age fashion designer Yeohlee Teng creates “shelters,” not “clothes.” Don’t mistake the two, now! She was hired by Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey, to help solve the problem of identification. Her plan has been successful with different color scrubs for different positions, but her outlook is lousy! She’s designing new nurse outfits that are, to say the least, trendy. (And she can’t understand why the nurses’ committee disapproves.) Nurses neither need nor want “V-neck, wrap dresses” and “fitted, three quarter length lab jackets.” Hospitals are not glamorous and to think so would be ignorant. More important than what the doctor puts on is where he puts the catheter or what he recommends his patients eat. Fashion is of no importance here.

So, getting back to my hospital confusion, there is one group of people I can always count on to be visible – the Red Cross girls! All decked out in...yes!...candy-striped dresses. One of the reasons we still wear those every-so-dorky dresses is that they are easily identifiable, and they also make people happy. You cannot look at me in that dress without laughing, but that is vital to people who are languishing in hospital beds. While they often cannot find much comfort in terms of future health, they should at least feel secure in their ability to recognize their helpers, healers, and friends.