

# THE SOUTH AFRICAN NURSING COUNCIL : 50 YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL SELF-REGULATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-regulation of the professions of nursing and midwifery became a reality in South Africa on 8 November 1944, when the first council meeting of the South African Nursing Council took place in Pretoria. Most appropriately, the opening speaker on this occasion was Mr Harry Gordon Lawrence, the Minister of Welfare and Demobilization, who had piloted the Nursing Act, No.45 of 1944, through Parliament. Exactly 50 years later, on 8 November 1994 the Council held its 108th meeting, this time in its own building, with a magnificent view of the venue where that historic first meeting took place - the west wing of the Union buildings.

As was the case 50 years ago, a time of transition is at hand, and it seems appropriate to pause alongside the bequest that the Council is passing on to a new dispensation, and to venture a brief resume of some of the developments which have formed this legacy.

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Data to describe the development of statutory control of the nursing profession in South Africa were obtained through reviewing the following original sources -

- Minutes of meetings of the South African Medical and Pharmacy Council
- Medical and Pharmacy Act of 1928, No 13 of 1928
- Minutes of meetings of the South African Nursing Council
- Five yearly reports of the South African Nursing Council
- Annual statistical reports of the South African Nursing Council
- Nursing Acts No 44 of 1945, No 69 of 1957, No 50 of 1978, No 21 of 1992 (Amendment Act)
- Policy documents of the South African Nursing Council
- Newspaper clippings and professional journal reports

- Assembly debates of the South African Parliament of 1944, 1957, 1978, 1992
- Minutes of the Task Force for a new Regulatory Body, 1994

Data gathering was followed by analysis, interpretation, critical comparison and determining of interrelationships to validate the factual accuracy. What follows in this article is a formulation of the events which preceded the creation of a nursing council and the developments over the following fifty years to culminate in what we know today as the South African Nursing Council.

## STATUTORY CONTROL : THE FIRST 53 YEARS

The promulgation of the Medical and Pharmacy Act, No 34 of 1891 on 21 August 1891, heralded a century of growth and development for nursing as a profession in South Africa. The basic intention of the Act was to extend the powers of the Cape Colonial Medical Council to protect the public by control of the nursing and midwifery professions. The significance of state registration for nurses and midwives was its anchoring in the standards it demanded. Momentum was given to the evolution of nursing by a collective drive to meet these standards.

Act 34 of 1891 contained all the elements needed to place nursing squarely on the road to true professional development. No other mechanism could have improved on this. In addition to the network of support that the Act could provide for the young developing profession through the established medical structure of the time, provision was also made for:-

- the setting of registration requirements for the training, examination and certification of nurses and midwives
- the recognition of further training and registration of additional nursing qualifications
- protection of the public against misrepresentation and protection of the rights attached to the title of registered nurse or midwife

- ethical control over nursing practice and
- the keeping of registers, the creation of regulations and the issuing, revoking and cancellation of certificates by the Medical Council.

In view of the important role played by the midwife in the life of the South African people, it is natural that the Act paid particular attention to the establishment and control of practice standards for the midwife.

The further stipulation that a list of registered nurses and midwives be published annually provided this country for the first time with an identifiable corps of professional nurses and midwives. An important conclusion which could be drawn from this is that the development of a professional corps must have led inevitably to consciousness of a group identity, and this in turn, stimulated the aspirations which culminated in the formation of a professional association in 1914.

Legislation for the registration of nurses and midwives in the other colonies followed over the ensuing thirteen years -

- Colony of Natal - Act 21 of 1899
- Orange River Colony - Ordinance No 1 of 1904
- Colony of Transvaal - Ordinance No 29 of 1904

After Union in 1910, control of nursing by the medical profession continued under the four Provincial Medical Councils. The first national control and the first participation of nurses in this control, came in 1928 through the promulgation of Act 13 of 1928, which made provision for direct representation by two nurses on the newly established South African Medical and Pharmacy Council. A nurse would in future serve on the Executive Committee of that Council. Initially the nurses were denied general voting rights in the Council but minutes of meetings demonstrate clearly that they were deeply involved in and had a significant influence on decision making. The first two nurse representatives were Mrs. L.L. Bennie and Miss B.G. Alexander. In addition both served on the Training, Examination and Registration Committee for Nurses, Midwives and

# South African Nursing Council Preious Papers

**David Bornstein**



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