

REPORTS OF THE NIS SUMMER STUDY DAY "USER EDUCATION FOR ALL" at THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF NURSING 6th July 1992.

Nurses' Information Needs by June Clark, RCN President.

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June Clark - whose one page article "Nursing: an intellectual activity" (BMJ 17 Aug. 1991) every nursing librarian, not to say nurse, nor medic, should be forced to read at gunpoint - gave the most stimulating and encouraging talk I, and I'm sure many others, have heard at any study day.

She began by claiming to share with Lady Thatcher (yes, I know..) two, but only two, qualities: that of never making uncontroversial speeches, and a very slight tendency to hyperbole. She would take "a broad view" of nurses needs, and aimed only to "plant some ideas." She certainly did.

Three main groups of nurses were considered in detail: pre-registration students, practising nurses, and nurse teachers.

On the subject of STUDENTS, Professor Clark strongly emphasised their changing needs. Changes in nurse education as well as in nursing practice have forced the pace dramatically in recent times. Among the former she included the change from training to

education models, and the "culture shock" of the move from hospital based settings to higher education. And she suggested that such higher education institutions may still not be very good at identifying nurse students' real information skills and needs...

Significant changes in practice include changes in the values and perceptions of nursing, new treatments and treatment approaches, new modes of understanding, and the new requirement of the critical practitioner, the "knowledgeable doer" of Project 2000.

But what of the information needs of this new type of student, thrown into a changing and uncertain world, in which very new, and perhaps contradictory, things are expected of them? Is it heresy to exult that we were not given, as so many of us librarians would have been tempted to give, a list of such things as "needs to use indexing journals," "needs access to research journals," and so on - or a list of the "information skills" we already claim

to "teach," or boring lists of books, journals, indexing journals or sources?

Instead of the predictable, Professor Clark gave us a little bit of magic: and why not, after a good lunch at the RCN. It's her patch, after all, and we were there to learn.

She began by warming the flickering cockles of the heart of every librarian present: telling the story of her own student days when, studying Classics in London, she had access to the British Museum library, and trained herself, with its rich resources, and friendly encouragement from a tutor, into an expert on Roman comedy - as a newish undergraduate!

These themes - rich resources and encouragement, and of self-directed learning (though she never used such a barbarous term..) as a result of curiosity - may have a sinister ring.

OK for the Classics, but she wasn't going to apply them to nursing, was she? Blow me, she did! HER view of nursing, of what these students are now letting themselves in for, and may themselves develop, is not the old view of a servile and semi-skilled manual job with no knowledge base of its own, but of what she calls in the BMJ article "an ancient art but a young discipline," whose core is clinical decision-making: as is medicine: hence the BMJ grenade, lobbed by invitation.

So what do students really NEED, in a profession in which - she tells us - lack of appreciation or use of a distinctive knowledge base, lack of

questioning, and lack of critical skills, are still pervasive? Here are some of her suggestions:

- to develop an intrinsic curiosity
- to foster a questioning spirit
- to develop critical analysis as a habit
- to be aware of the richness of resources
- to develop the skills to use these resources
- to seek and use information in decision-making
- to "find and use expert opinion" (Henderson)
- to be aware of the range of libraries available
- to be aware of the vital importance of journals
- to develop the habits of skilful journal use
- to develop a range of search skills
- to become expert in bibliographical sources.
- to understand and integrate research into nursing.

On the subject of PRACTISING nurses - who we all know often fall through the nets of our services, and who often start at a disadvantage, (perhaps feeling threatened by current new developments, smart new students, and librarians with clever toys?), Professor Clark mentioned the vital role that we may have of helping them gain and develop an awareness of what is available and possible, of becoming motivated to take on the new

challenges, of reawakening their curiosity: to enable them to take the plunge into the continuing education that is now their lot, if they are fully to develop.

And access to library facilities is a feature that we must develop: why should users not access the library more from home (or work?), now that today's technology allows it?

With her remarks on NURSE TEACHERS, however, the fat was really in the fire. Professor Clark was far too diplomatic to criticise us, but we may often overlook the fact that the new generations of nurse teachers have not always been fully prepared for their new roles in higher education and research.

She was not as gentle with her own, however. Many tutors do not fully understand research, or read it as critically as they need to. Her example of those who speak of "applying" research "as if it were a sticking plaster" is apposite.

Many know they have fallen behind their students in literature search or bibliographical skills. We may be badly overlooking their needs, needs which they may be very reluctant to express, but with which they may need our help.

At the same time, many nurse teachers do not recognise fully what we may have to offer, and thus fail to take advantage of, and even to undervalue, our services and skills - both for themselves, and for their students..

In speaking of the role that we might have in meeting these needs, she used such terms as "nurture," "foster," "facilitate," "motivate," "raise awareness," and "raise the motivation and attitude barrier." Terms such as "critical skills," "questioning," "attitudes," and, "curiosity" were the central ganglia of Professor Clark's fine new creature.

The purist might argue that this is all very well, but much too general. How can we "teach" these things? The day was about reader education after all: and when we librarians ask the question about "information needs," we are thinking a little more narrowly than this fine talk suggests.

How do we teach curiosity?

I think that all of us involved in reader education for nurses must begin to ask these wider questions more seriously, and to begin to take a wider view of "information needs".

We might need to consider our own education attitudes and approaches in greater depth: to develop teaching methods which inspire and motivate as well as merely give information, and to convey by our own example and approach the spirit of critical thinking and analysis, the challenging of fixed views, and the terrier approach to questioning and searching.

As librarians, do we not tend to narrow our thinking with that weasel word "information?" Teaching is not imparting information alone, any more than learning is passively soaking it up,

but gentle inspiring? - without which nothing much is learned.

Perhaps it might also be made to involve showing others what we have been privileged to experience, and what Professor Clark so expertly and enjoyably reminded us of: the richness of resources, the joy of curiosity, and the rewarding, often frustrating, hard work of ferreting out knowledge, opinion, controversy, doubt, even wisdom - and not just information - which they need and must use in real life decision-making.

And for the learner, is it not true that without these "general" things, using an information source, or whatever we try to teach in a library, is a dry and lifeless thing: as it is so often to teach or learn? Information is never enough.

During question time, the issue of the non-recognition of librarians' reader education skills by nurse teachers loomed large, as one might expect. We

are all too often not even given enough time to begin to give their students the skills they really need. And such esoterica as genuine input to curriculum planning (subject of a previous NIS study day...) are on the far horizon for all too many of us.

Do we, though, have our own house fully in order here?

We expect to be treated as equals by nurse teachers, but how many librarians can really talk to nurse teachers about education as equals: as themselves trained teachers? We all accept the necessity of training for nursing or librarianship, but too often believe that "anyone who knows it can teach it" - a notion for which all the evidence points to the contrary.

We cannot always speak their language, and our reader education is often not as self-marketing as it should be..

Is the onus on US, if we want to be taken more seriously?