practice in depth

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The debate over the status of nursing as a profession and the link to the status of physical work and education has a long history. This is important as it affects the economic, academic and social status of those involved in carrying out direct patient care. This is especially true in nursing specialties known for their high levels of physical care, such medical and elderly care.

Nursing education

In educational institutions, the status of those involved in teaching skills has a lower status than those involved in more academic subjects (Martin, 1989). This can be seen in the emergence in the 1950s of a specific clinical teacher (CT) role. CTs were paid on a lower grade than other nurse tutors and were required to do a six month teaching course rather than the full tutor 12 month programme. This led participants of a survey by the Royal College of Nursing in the 1970s to describe colleagues perceiving their role as one of “failed tutors” (Hinchliff, 1986).

This debate about the status of clinical practice led to the removal of the specific CT role during the changes in nurse professional registration and education in the late 1980s. This remodelling followed the Briggs report on nursing (Department of Health and Social Security, 1972) and subsequently the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979. This took place at a similar time as the removal of the enrolled nurse (EN) role and the switch from apprenticeship to higher education.

The idea of making a single status for nurses and nurse educators was designed in part to improve the low status given to those nurses and educators involved in the giving or teaching of direct care. However, the consequence of that was a perception – widely held by the general public and healthcare professionals, including many nurses – that RNs and nurse educators withdrew from direct patient care such as washing, feeding and toileting (Department of Health, 1997). This became an issue to the extent that questions were raised in the House of Lords.

The profession and the DH announced measures to raise the amount of clinical skills taught to students in preregistration education (UKCC, 2001; DH, 1999) and to reintroduce a specific practice teacher qualification to the register (NMC, 2006).