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Media Release

Leeches, rations and curfews - nursing times 70 years ago

The NHS celebrates its 70th anniversary in July and to mark it we've been talking to some of the staff who were there at the very beginning.

Meet Edith Kenney – 70 years ago one of the first student nurses to join the fledgling NHS at what's become today The Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust (RUH).

Times were very different in 1948. Post-war rationing was still in force. The then Edith Barker, aged 18 and living with her family in Bath, earned just £5 a month. Part of her training included learning how to apply leeches to patients' skin.

Edith said: "As far back as I can remember I always wanted to be a nurse but my grandmother and parents were very much against it. My grandmother thought I would be a skivvy – so I shelved my ambition and worked as an office secretary at Sparrow's Solicitors in Bath."

Then she spotted an advert in the Bath Chronicle looking for hospital volunteers at evenings and weekends to help out on the wards. Edith saw this as her chance to get closer to the job she always wanted.

"I was so excited when I went for my interview and even more so when I was asked to join the volunteering team. I enjoyed every minute of it. I loved talking to the patients, giving them cups of tea and helping Sister whenever she asked me. One day Sister Hughes said to me 'Why don't you become a nurse Edith? You're a born nurse and you absolutely love it.' This was true but I explained my family was against the idea and she left it at that."

But Edith persevered. Her family eventually relented and, in 1947, she was accepted on the hospital's three-month Preliminary Training School. She was on her way to becoming a nurse.

"Our set was all female nurses – no married nurses allowed and there were very few male nurses. We lived in the one of those big houses opposite the RUH and were taught the basic nursing skills from our Sister tutor, such as how to make a hospital bed, giving a blanket bath, giving injections, taking blood pressure, bandaging, preparing a poultice and even how to apply leeches. Sister told us that leeches were in fact obsolete – and now they're in use again to prevent blood clots and in plastic surgery.



“We all longed for the day we could have our black belt, cast away our butterfly hats and have our dark blue nurses’ uniform. Our salary was £5 per month – equivalent to £180 today. But we were satisfied because we had full board, laundry of our uniform, a maid to clean our rooms and breakfast in bed on our day off. The hours were long but we had jolly times in Bath, as long as we were back by 10 o’clock and respected the rules set out by the Sister in charge.

“You also need to remember rationing was in place in 1948. We were given two jam jars once a week – one filled with 3oz of butter and the other with 4oz of sugar. Even though there was rationing the food was good, but we were always hungry and took it in turns to scrape the rice pudding dish in the ward kitchen – only if Sister was well out of the way.”

In 2015 Edith was a patient at the RUH in 2015 and noticed several changes from her time as a nurse.

“Our visiting hours were different back then, it was just Wednesday and Saturday 2.30pm – 3.30pm and no evening visits. Sister was always there and the ward was locked before 2.30pm so it could be tidied. No children could visit and patients were allowed to smoke. The nurses today are just as devoted as we were – much busier in a different kind of way. Nowadays they’re able to do things that only a doctor would do in our day. I could see the technical differences today’s nurses are able to do for patients”.

Edith worked at the RUH for four years, spending time on different wards as part of her training and on Duncan Ward as a volunteer and as a qualified nurse. She left the RUH in 1952 to work at Winsley Chest Hospital, later becoming a midwife and also working as a District Nurse in Taunton.

She said: “When I go back to the RUH for our nursing reunions I feel just like I did when I was younger. I would like to wish the NHS a very happy 70th birthday and I hope it produces the next generation of lovely nurses like it has been doing for decades.”

We’re collecting stories and memorabilia from patients, workers, volunteers and the public relating to the RUH. To get involved email us: ruh-tr.communicationteam@nhs.net. The NHS is turning 70 on 5 July 2018 and you can find out more at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/nhs70/>

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Notes to Editor:

- The Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust provides acute treatment and care for a catchment population of around 500,000 people in Bath, and the surrounding towns and villages in North East Somerset and Western Wiltshire. The hospital provides healthcare to the population served by four Clinical Commissioning Groups: Bath & North East Somerset CCG, Wiltshire CCG, Somerset CCG and South Gloucestershire CCG.



- The Trust provides 565 beds and a comprehensive range of acute services including medicine and surgery, services for women and children, accident and emergency services, and diagnostic and clinical support services.
- In 2015 The Royal United Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust was acquired the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases (RNHRD) NHS Foundation Trust. The RNHRD treats patients from across the country offering services in rheumatology, chronic pain and chronic fatigue syndrome/ME.
- The RUH is changing - we have an exciting programme of redevelopment underway transforming our site and further improving the services we provide. The Trust is now working towards building a purpose built RNHRD and Therapies Centre and a new Dyson Cancer Centre. For more details visit: www.ruh.nhs.uk/about/fit_for_the_future
- For more information about the Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust visit: www.ruh.nhs.uk

