Celebrating nursing history

From the polio epidemic to notorious gangsters and dramatic changes in medical technology, the alumni of the Ancker Hospital School of Nursing have had a front row view to the history of healthcare in St. Paul. Graduates worked at Ancker Hospital and later at St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center/Regions Hospital.

Virginia Kelly and a friend arrived in St. Paul from South Dakota to attend the Ancker Hospital School of Nursing. They were two days early because the train to St. Paul ran only once a week. In 1950, tuition was $300, including room, board and books.

While most of the practical nursing classes were held at Ancker, classes such as microbiology and anatomy were held at the College of St. Catherine’s. Each Monday, the students would get a token and money to ride the street car and buy lunch. “We often saved the money so we could go to the theater,” said Kelly. She remembered taking choir at Ancker – a required course – and the Christmas concerts they gave with other groups at the civic center.

The polio epidemic
Kelly graduated early from nursing school in 1953 and worked 12 hours a day, seven days per week because the polio epidemic had forced hundreds of people into the hospital. “We applied hot packs to patients’ paralyzed limbs to prevent the spread of paralysis,” she said. The hospital had four iron lungs where the sickest of patients were placed to help them breathe. Hospital staff wore masks and gowns but no gloves (rubber gloves were used in surgery only), and there was a lot of hand washing taking place, thanks to Birgit Tofte, the contagion specialist at the time.

Later as an OR nurse, Kelly recalled 14-hour surgeries to remove diseased lung tissue from tuberculosis patients. “It was hard because we had no air conditioning in the OR,” she said. “We used to open the windows. Sometimes it would be so hot, we filled rubber gloves with ice to cool the surgeons, and we helped them wipe sweat from their brow.” Kelly resigned from Ancker Hospital in 1965 and returned to St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center as a staff nurse in 1986 and worked another 18 years.

Famous patients
Leona Schmidt graduated from Ancker Hospital School of nursing 75 years ago with the class of 1933. At 96 years old, she attended the recent nurse reunion at Regions, and she attended last year’s social. Schmidt recalled when a member of John Dillinger’s bank-robbing gang was a patient. She said there was a rumor that Dillinger was going to come to the hospital to “finish him off,” and heavily armed FBI agents were at the hospital to guard the patient. “I was so scared, I spent much of my shift in the ladies room,” she said. She later worked in the operating room and the emergency room, and she spent many years as the night supervisor at Ancker Hospital.

St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center opens
Schmidt’s daughter, Sandy Carlson, was also an Ancker graduate – class of 1961. She remembers her school days when they practiced giving injections on an orange, giving bed baths and making up beds. In charting classes, instructors used to hold up good and bad examples of student work for the entire class to see. She said that all nursing students were required to live in the dorms – even those who lived right in St. Paul. “As freshman, our curfew was 10 o’clock,” she said.

Carlson said most patients at Ancker were placed in long wards with many beds. Nurses moved a portable screen from one bed to another to provide some privacy. In 1965, Ancker Hospital closed, and they transported all the patients who were not discharged home to the new St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center in semi trucks. Carlson’s nursing career included years in surgery, the emergency room and clinics.

Counting drips
“During our second and third years as students, we rotated through pediatrics, OB, psych and other special services,” recalled Shirley Liesch, class of 1957. “We were under the supervision of the area supervisor and were not paired with a graduate nurse. We were given full assignments. When we were seniors, we worked as charge nurses.” Continued on page 2
Celebrating nursing history

Liesch, who retired in 1993 as lead nurse for the Seniors Clinic, said there have been many changes over the years. Patients used to have long hospital stays – one patient she remembered was hospitalized all winter. She recalled counting the drips from IVs to ensure they were flowing at about the right rate and checking them often to make sure they weren’t plugged up.

In those days, you couldn’t take a leave of absence to have a baby – you had to quit and then reapply if you wanted to come back. She returned to work in 1965 to the Surgical ICU, a unit she had never worked on. She said there was little orientation and lots of new technology such as chest tubes and ventilators. “I asked a lot of questions,” she said.

Liesch worked for several years in the ICU, so when her husband was recently an ICU patient, she felt comfortable. She noted that patients are still on ventilators post surgery but was surprised to see that most everyone – not just diabetics – are on IV insulin drips after surgery.

“While some things are the same, many other things have changed over time, and I guess that’s for the better,” she said.

Ancker was one of the last schools to issue diplomas rather than degrees in nursing. The last class to graduate from the Ancker Hospital School of Nursing was in 1975.

Anker grads attend reunion at Regions

Graduates from the Ancker Hospital School of Nursing came from as far away as California to attend the all-alumni reunion held May 16-17. The reunion, which was hosted by Regions Hospital Foundation and nursing administration, attracted 160 former and current nurses who came for the socializing and memory sharing. One grad commented about an early Ancker class that included how to arrange flowers in vases for patients. A skit performed by the grads demonstrated past nursing practices and included a nurse who took a patient’s blood pressure and then told the patient a doctor would be in shortly to tell her the results.

The reunion attracted nurses from a different era, including one from the class of 1933 and another from the class of 1940. The reunion included tours of Regions, an alumni tea, luncheon, program and memorabilia display.

Cindy Heinn, Regions patient flow coordinator, graduated with the class of 1972. “To celebrate our graduation, we strung our blue and white striped uniform aprons together outside of the seventh floor windows of our dorm, which is now Behavioral Health.” Heinn, who got her start at Regions as a nursing assistant at the age of 16, guided many of the alumni on the tours and said everyone had a great time.

The Ancker grads have established a scholarship fund for Regions employees who are pursuing a nursing education. The grads are making plans for how the funds will be distributed.

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Anker nurses provide a glimpse of our past

Five RNs who graduated from Ancker School of Nursing currently work in the Regions Digestive Care Center. They are Cheryl Campbell, Janice Dickes, Deb Edlund, Marita Karras and Fran Reiser. Over the course of their careers, they worked in a number of areas, including the emergency room and intensive care, and they’ve seen many changes.

ICU’s were new in the 1960’s. The MICU included two rooms that shared a nursing station. “What made it an ICU was that each bed had an oxygen cylinder attached to it, and there was an EKG available in the vicinity,” said Reiser.

The ladies laughed when describing the “wonderful new technology” of the 1960’s. The first computer to monitor arterial blood pressure was the size of a refrigerator – but it provided a reading they didn’t previously have. In the ER, large defibrillators with “tiny monitors” provided a view to a patient’s heart rate and rhythm. Also at that time, trauma patients were sent from the ER to Room 10 in the OR to be stabilized, and “Room 10 stat” was the familiar phrase on the overhead pager instead of today’s, “Trauma team, emergency department.”

ER triage was first implemented and the first medics were trained in the 1970’s. Nurses from the ER and ICUs helped train and mentor those early medics so that emergency treatment could begin in the field. “The medics helped save a lot of lives,” said Karras, who added that Dr. Robert van Tyn, the ER director at the time, helped establish the foundation for today’s EMS.

The nurses also remembered some of the “little things” from years past: IV fluids that came only in glass bottles, Stryker frame beds used to flip patients with neck injuries, and heat lamps used to treat patients with bedsores. The hospital had its own dairy, bakery and butcher shop, and the lunchroom for nursing students featured linens on every table and delicious food such as “soda cracker” pie.

Pictured above: Five nurses from the Digestive Care Center graduated from the Ancker Hospital School of Nursing. Pictured left to right: Cheryl Campbell, Marita Karras, Fran Reiser and Deb Edlund (sitting). Not pictured: Janice Dickes.