**“Tyranny on the wards”: Establishing Empathy in British Nursing Education, 1900 – 1939**

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In June 1907, a young nurse called Rosamund wrote to the British journal, *Nursing Mirror,* to describe the emotional ordeal of her student days, and the tears she had shed in response to the “tyranny” on the wards. Although some contributors agreed with Rosamund’s view of the cruelty of senior staff, others claimed that this harsh treatment formed essential training in “unselfishness”. “The tears shed during training are, in my opinion,” one writer concluded, “as much the outcome of injured pride as anything.”

In this talk I outline how discipline in British nursing schools was deemed essential to create the ideal nurse: unselfish, sympathetic, and obedient. I argue that the methods used to shape the character of these nurses – as well as the traits desired – emerged from Victorian attitudes towards class and gender. Working-class girls were seen to be especially “wilful” and needed to be firmly handled in order to become “nice” girls: polite, dutiful and virtuous. Sympathy, in this gendered context, meant a complete surrender of one’s own needs and desires to the vocation of nursing.

While nurse leaders continued to uphold the value of this approach throughout this period, elsewhere the strict regime of hospital schools began to seem old-fashioned in later decades. *The Lancet* blamed educational practices for a shortage of nurses in the 1920s and 1930s, while the popular press contrasted the rigid discipline with the freedom of the modern woman, who could “think and act and vote for herself”. I conclude by considering what this divergence tells us about changes in gendered views of emotion in this period, and how the conflict shaped the idea of sympathy (and empathy) within the nursing profession itself.