

Lifeworks

Capping off an era

At one time every nursing school had its distinctive cap with stylized peaks and wings. Capping ceremonies were a powerful rite of passage into training, and variously coloured bands denoted the nurse's year in training, black being the definitive goal.

But, by the mid 1980s, these caps had virtually vanished from the Canadian health care scene. Many nurses undoubtedly lamented the loss, but Gloria Kay of Conestogo, Ont., went a step further and began "saving a few from destruction."

Eventually, she had carefully indexed and preserved 282 caps. "I loved nursing," she explains. "It was an emo-

caps to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Que., where a new exhibit, *Symbol of a Profession: One Hundred Years of Nurses' Caps in Canada*, runs until Sept. 30. Sponsored by the Canadian Nurses Association and the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing, it features 60 caps representing every province and dating from 1895 to 1983.

These caps are artifacts of the evolution of nursing in North America, beginning with the nun's coif worn by the Hospitalières, a Roman Catholic nursing order that arrived in Quebec in 1639. Secular nursing in English-speaking North America was less formal; female family members assumed the role at home, and charwomen did so in hospitals. Not surprisingly, during the 1870s the nurse's cap was virtually the same as the mob cap worn by working women indoors.

By the 20th century nursing caps took two basic shapes: mob cap and nun's coif. Over the years the mob cap developed crisp angles with a stiff pleated band. The coif was modified into a practical yet emblematic kerchief by Florence Nightingale, who developed a secular system of training in the mid 1800s. During the Great Wars, Canada's nursing sisters wore this kerchief. But, gradually, it too became more stylized with wings and bands, perched high on the head with no prac-

tical purpose other than professional identification.



Cap from the Victoria Hospital School of Nursing, London, Ont., circa 1902

Of course, not every nursing cap fit this mould. The University of Saskatchewan Nursing School's cap was a white mortarboard, while the cylindrical cap from the Freemason's Hospital in Morden, Man., looked like a fez.

Despite the arduous process of cleaning, starching and folding, nurses were proud of their caps, says Kay. "Everything was wrapped up in that darn cap." Why then did they stop wearing them? Exhibit curator Tina Bates says it may have been part of an attempt to professionalize nursing in the mid 1970s, when nurses wanted to be more closely aligned with physicians and other professionals who didn't wear uniforms.

At the same time, hospital-based schools of nursing were giving way to



Gloria (Barton) Kay holding a mob cap and a more modern example from her collection

tional thing and the caps symbolize the love I have for my profession."

Kay recently donated 167 of her

Courtesy The Record, Kitchener, Ont.

Canadian Museum of Civilization



Cap from the British Columbia School of Nursing, Vancouver, *circa* 1968

colleges and universities, and so the apprenticeship system of teaching, with its ritualized progress through the ranks, no long dominated nursing education. Thus the cap lost much of its meaning as a signifier of achievement at various levels. And it became less typical for nurses to be affiliated with a single hospital throughout their career.

Also during this era, men were being encouraged to join the profession; caps

couldn't be part of that package.

The risk of infection may also have played a part in the cap's demise, says Diana Mansell, president of the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing, and the only Canadian to hold a doctorate in nursing history. The cotton or linen caps were difficult to clean and starch and were washed only about every three months.

Their phasing-out also coincided with the second wave of feminism and the unionization of the profession.

"A lot of tradition went out all at once," says Mansell. But she laments their passing. "The cap made a nurse visible in the hospital. Now we've vanished."

Beginning in June 2001, you can take an online tour of the exhibit at www.civilization.ca.

Barbara Sibbald
CMAJ

Inukshuk

Pointing with blunted maybe arms
forever
at something —
the man of stone
we built in our backyard
never moves —
instant eternity
in the flow of time.

He points
with calm certainty
beyond horizons
men of flesh
can never see.

Robert C. Dickson
Family physician
Hamilton, Ont.