



## Issues for Debate

## Nursing education in Poland – The past and new development perspectives

Barbara Ślusarska<sup>a,\*</sup>, Danuta Zarzycka<sup>b</sup>, Beata Dobrowolska<sup>c</sup>, Ludmiła Marcinowicz<sup>d</sup>,  
Grzegorz Nowicki<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Family Medicine and Community Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University of Lublin, Poland

<sup>b</sup> Chair and Department of Paediatric Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University of Lublin, Poland

<sup>c</sup> Chair of Development in Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University, Lublin, Poland

<sup>d</sup> Department of Family Medicine and Community Nursing, Medical University of Białystok, Poland



## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Nursing education  
Polish education system  
Undergraduate education  
Postgraduate education

## ABSTRACT

Professional nursing education in Poland began in 1911 in Kraków. Since then, the nursing education system has continued to change. From the establishment of the first professional nursing school, Poland experienced partition, war and the German occupation, short-lived independence, the Soviet regime and the regaining of its freedom, as well as the development of democracy processes. All of these events impacted on nurses' education. The current state of nursing training is determined by the requirements of the Council of the European Communities. Today, the challenge for nursing education in Poland is the permanent process of the country's education system's adjustment to the European Higher Education Area to ensure the quality of education and to support the mobility of students and academic teachers. Additionally, new competencies pertaining to nurse prescribing, which have been in force in Poland since 2016, will cause new changes to the under- and post-graduate programmes of nursing education. The aim of this study is to present the development of nursing education in Poland in the context of socio-political changes in the country and from the perspective of current nursing challenges worldwide.

## 1. Introduction

Changes to nursing education in Poland are determined by a range of conditions. The changing socio-political situation in the country, as well as the standards set by international organisations have had an impact in this context. Additionally, the health needs of society are important factors that influence these changes. From the establishment of the first professional nursing school in Kraków in 1911, Poland experienced partition, war and the German occupation, short-lived independence, the Soviet regime and the regaining of its freedom and the development of democratic processes, all of which had a significant impact on nurses' education.

For the past 13 years, following the signing of the EU accession treaty by Poland, nursing has undergone significant transformation as a result of European legislation. The biggest changes have been those made to the nature and scope of undergraduate nursing education by making it available at the academic level (Bachelor in Nursing). Postgraduate education has also changed; Polish nurses can now continue their education with a variety of postgraduate-level courses and can also undertake a master's degree programme. Finally, doctoral

studies for nurses are also available and are becoming increasingly popular. The current nursing education system in Poland prepares the graduate to provide independent nursing care.

The aim of this study is to present the development of nursing education in Poland in the context of socio-political changes in the country and from the perspective of the current challenges in nursing worldwide.

## 2. Method

## 2.1. Study design

This study was undertaken using the narrative literature review approach, which is understood as the non-systematic review of published materials covering the topic being studied (Grant and Both, 2009; Paré et al., 2015). The non-comprehensive search strategy was performed to identify significant papers using the key words regarding the history and changes of nursing undergraduate and postgraduate education in Poland. Selected electronic databases were searched (The Polish Medical Bibliography, PubMed and Google Scholar).

\* Corresponding author. Department of Family Medicine and Community Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University, ul. Staszica 4/6, 20-081 Lublin, Poland.

E-mail addresses: [barbara.slusarska@umlub.pl](mailto:barbara.slusarska@umlub.pl) (B. Ślusarska), [danuta.zarzycka@umlub.pl](mailto:danuta.zarzycka@umlub.pl) (D. Zarzycka), [beata.dobrowolska@umlub.pl](mailto:beata.dobrowolska@umlub.pl) (B. Dobrowolska), [ludmila.marcinowicz@umb.edu.pl](mailto:ludmila.marcinowicz@umb.edu.pl) (L. Marcinowicz), [grzegorz.nowicki@umlub.pl](mailto:grzegorz.nowicki@umlub.pl) (G. Nowicki).

Furthermore, manual searching was performed with the aim of identifying law documents regarding nursing education, master and doctoral thesis on Polish nursing history, non-electronic nursing journals and also archival documents available in the Central Archive for Polish Nursing in Warsaw. The language of the papers searched was Polish and English.

## 2.2. Data analysis

A chronological analysis of documents collected was undertaken i.e. a review of literature in a historical context. Three researchers separately analysed the collected documents describing the main events regarding the process of nursing education development in Poland. This was followed by a discussion of the findings between researchers, which resulted with a single scheme of education development. The next step was drafting article based on the scheme agreed.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. The beginnings of the development of professional nursing education in Poland – 20th century

The history of secular, professional nursing training in Poland begins at the start of the 20th century, when the first the Professional Nurses School of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul was established in 1911. The school operated until 1921 (including a two-year gap during World War I) and had a significant influence on the development of secular nursing in Poland. That school had many features of a professional nursing training facility. The programme was based on German school models and included both theoretical and practical training (Poznańska, 1988).

Between 1918 and 1939, a total of nine schools of nursing were established. By 1925, there had been four schools of nursing operating in Poland: the Warsaw School of Nursing in Warsaw (1921), the Catholic School of Nursing in Poznań (1921), the Jewish School in Warsaw (1923), and the University School of Nurses and Hygienists in Kraków (1925). The school in Kraków operated under the auspices of the oldest university in Poland. It was headed by Maria Epstein, who gained considerable recognition in the eyes of the American nurse Elisabeth Crowell, a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided the funds for equipment, salaries, scholarships in the United States, and the school's modernisation. All schools were founded as autonomous bodies independent from hospitals, and provided instruction to professionals, who could seek employment at various types of healthcare institutions (Majda et al., 2015).

Each of the above-mentioned schools had its own university premises, often next to a hospital, which guaranteed practical training. Experienced and well-educated professional nurses worked in schools and were often part of the social elite, studied abroad or had internships in countries like the USA, France, Austria and others. The training system initially included a two-year education cycle; in a short time, however, this was extended to two-and-a-half years (Poznańska, 1988).

Nursing school candidates were recruited from graduates of six-year or eight-year secondary school and after the reform of the education system in Poland, from the graduates of four-year gymnasiums. Moreover, candidates had to be at least 18 years old and receive a positive assessment of their suitability for the nursing profession (Urbanek, 2008).

A crucial event in the history of Polish nursing during this period that impacted on changes to the professional training and strengthening of the nursing profession was the establishment of the Polish Association of Professional Nurses (in 1925), which was accepted by the ICN (International Council of Nurses) three months later. ICN membership allowed access to the international nursing heritage and the possibility for international cooperation and comprehensive assistance (Kaniowska-Iżycka, 1987, p. 71).

The first law on the rights and responsibilities of nurses was passed on 21 February 1935 by the Polish Parliament, by virtue of Article 44 of the Constitution of Poland (*The Act on Nursing, 1935*). Nursing as a profession gained a legal status; the range of responsibilities and nursing rights as well as the professional organisation and curriculum of nursing schools were standardised. The statute was in force for 61 years until 1996, withstanding numerous political and socio-economic changes, and during this time was only amended twice (Dalkowska et al., 2007).

According to the above statute, nursing training was given exclusively to nursing schools managed by nurses. The supervision of schools was the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Care. Education in nursing schools lasted two-and-a-half years and the requirements for candidates, and the essential conditions of theoretical and practical training were clearly defined. Prerequisites for registered nurses were introduced. Nurses were included in the white-collar group of workers (*The Act on Nursing, 1935*).

The dynamic development of vocational training in Polish nursing was disrupted by World War II. In 1939, World War II interfered with personal freedoms as Poland endured military occupation until 1945. During the post-war period, the number of nursing school graduates did not meet the needs for rebuilding Poland's healthcare system. After the war, Poland had only 5840 nurses, among whom only roughly 1000 had undertaken formal nursing education, while the projected need was 50 000 (Kaniowska-Iżycka, 1988). Economic and social conditions in post-war Poland were extremely challenging, which gave rise to the development of many epidemic diseases, including infectious ones. The need for healthcare was disproportionate to the possibilities for providing it because of the lack of medical personnel – both nurses and doctors. The socio-political situation was even more difficult due to the Soviet philosophy of the marginalisation of people and destroying the pre-war achievements of Polish culture, science and education (Szpak, 2014).

The lack of nursing staff in hospitals was compensated for by individuals lacking proper professional background and only limited training was provided. The biggest impact in this context came from training prepared by the sisters of the Sanitary Emergency Polish Red Cross in military hospitals, as well as six-month nursing courses in secondary schools. Women who completed these courses were called 'nursing assistants'. At the same time, some pre-war nursing schools (two or two-and-a-half years following nine years of general education) were re-established (Maksymowicz, 1997).

During this time, the development of nursing education became extremely differentiated. During the 1960s, the modernisation of nursing education began in response to general education reforms in Poland. Nursing education was introduced in the form of five-year nursing secondary schools (lyceum), following seven or eight years of primary school education. The diploma graduates of these lyceums as well as the pre-existing two and two-and-a-half-year schools qualified for university studies (Cholewka, 2013).

The Polish Nursing Association of Professional Nurses was re-activated in 1957 as the Polish Nursing Association (Wolska-Lipiec, 1987). Thanks to its activity, a three-year Nursing College at the Medical Academy in Lublin (1969) was established. Next, on the basis of former nursing colleges, the first academic centre for educating nurses was opened in the country – the Faculty of Nursing at the Medical Academy in Lublin (1972), which also initiated cooperation with the WHO. Soon, four more nursing faculties were created – in Poznań, Kraków, Katowice and Wrocław, where nurses were trained at the postgraduate level to receive the Master of Nursing Degree (Słosorz, 2014) (Fig. 1).

The transformation of the nursing system in Poland that began in the 1980s resulted from the liberation of Poland from the Soviet influence and the democratisation of the political system in 1989. Nurses took advantage of this situation and began intensive, multidimensional activities aimed at redesigning their practice and their education at

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