

‘Care left undone’: Not a new phenomenon

Nurses working in contemporary clinical environments are challenged by numerous organisational and external pressures. These pressures include increasing complexities of care, regular staffing deficits, poor skill-mix, and a high patient turnover. Such pressures impact on the nurse’s capacity to provide appropriate and timely care resulting in poorer health outcomes for the patient and the risk of burnout for the nurse. These lapses in care are commonly cited as being a ‘sign of the times’ of contemporary health care systems and consequently are considered a phenomenon which is unique to today’s nursing practice.

However, a seventeenth-century nursing text challenges this assumption. *Instruccion de Enfermeros (Instructions for Nurses)* was first published in 1617 as an instructional guide for (presumably) novice nurses working at the Madrid General Hospital. This text’s content alludes to numerous organisational and external pressures which the nursing profession will recognise as being similar to those faced today. These pressures included: rapid population growth, the consolidation of services, poor public reputation, bed shortages, funding shortfalls, and an advancement in medical knowledge and techniques. *Instruccion de Enfermeros’* content indicates such pressures impacted on the expectations and role performance of the nurse working in seventeenth-century Spain.

This presentation will examine the nursing resource through a historical lens. By using exemplars from *Instruccion de Enfermeros*, the issues surrounding organisation ethics

and the (mis)use of the nursing resource will be explored. The presentation will demonstrate that 'care left undone' is not a new phenomenon. This begs the question: Why does this phenomenon persist?