



TRIBUTE

A key founder of practice development: in celebration of Dr Susan Pembrey, 1942-2013

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As protégées, colleagues and dear friends of Dr Susan Pembrey, it is with a great sadness that we tell you about Sue's death after a long struggle with Parkinson's Disease and depression. Sue, a vibrant and beautiful woman, was one of the UK's outstanding nursing leaders of the late 20th century. Her primary contributions included supporting the academic development of clinical nursing and the development of nursing practice through the strengthening of the ward sister's leadership role, and pioneering a commitment to patient-centred hospital care.

Sue trained at the Nightingale School of Nursing at St Thomas' Hospital London and worked there as a ward sister, a role she cherished for the rest of her life. She was educated at the London School of Economics in social administration and undertook her PhD at the University of Edinburgh. The PhD was published by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) as a monograph: *The Ward Sister – Key to Nursing: A Study of the Organisation of Individualised Nursing* (Pembrey, 1980). This work remains relevant today and was recently cited as one of the most influential pieces of research of the past 50 years. As a colleague of ours, midwife Lesley Page, reflected at Sue's funeral, 'It is a pity that the government did not look at this work before responding to the recent [UK] Frances Inquiry into Mid Staffordshire'.

Sue's enduring commitment to the university education of nurses was already evident in her early work with Lord Asa Briggs who, in 1972, led a crucial commission on nursing, which proposed university education for nurses. Sue's key contribution to the development of practice followed her appointment as District Clinical Practice Nurse at Oxfordshire Health Authority by the then Chief Nurse Jacqui Flindall. Sue had the vision to recognise the opportunities to appoint graduate nurses as practising nurses in Oxfordshire as a basis for transforming the development and organisation of hospital care. A number of designated wards within Oxford became the base for testing innovations related to patient-centred nursing care and the organisation of practice; these innovations were disseminated regionally and nationally. In particular, Sue played a key role in the instigation of the Oxford Nursing Development Unit in 1989, based at the Radcliffe Infirmary, testing the idea of nursing beds for those requiring intensive inpatient nursing and rehabilitation. Her work also included the creation of the Lecturer-Practitioner role, in which clinical nurses undertook both care and educational leadership responsibilities.

In 1989, to strengthen this growing range of developments, Sue secured charitable funding to set up in the Institute of Nursing in Oxford (latterly, the National Institute for Nursing and then the RCN Institute), based at the Radcliffe Infirmary. The Institute was an independent organisation working in

close partnership with Oxfordshire Health Authority, and Sue forged key collaborative links with the University of Oxford, particularly the Faculty of Medicine and the Department of Educational Studies, and the Department of Health Care Studies at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University). There were also links with a number of national organisations, including the Royal College of Nursing and The King's Fund, London. This collaboration was inspired by a vision that included the integration of 'nursing practice development with first class scholarship in a way that is unique to nursing' (Pembrey, 1992, p 4). The Institute continued to test out new practices through its research and development programme in, for example, acute medicine, care of the older person, dermatology and midwifery. Sue's national contribution to nursing was recognised through her appointment as a Fellow of the Royal College of Nursing in 1979, an invitation to work with Dr Harry Judge on the College's Commission of Nursing Education in 1985 and, in 1990, the award of an OBE (an honour bestowed by the British monarch). Sue helped to support the development of a number of nursing leaders through her generous and intelligent mentorship – which is where we come in. Steve begins.

Steve

Sue played a major formative role in my development as a new graduate nurse, first as an appointee to the newly created Oxford Nursing Development Unit and then to the Institute of Nursing. Through her generous mentorship and encouragement I, and many other health professionals, went on to assume leadership positions. This helped to lay strong foundations for the support of practice development work and practice-related research in nursing. Sue took calculated risks in locating new nursing leaders in new clinical areas to support their transformation – in my case, in the underdeveloped field of dermatology nursing. She also sponsored doctoral research work in complex areas; in my case it was the therapeutic relationship between nurse and patient. She believed in the importance of demonstrating innovative practice ideas and the need to test the application of theoretical ideas to patient care in order to establish their true benefit. Indeed, I would argue that Sue Pembrey was a pioneer of the analysis and evaluation of the practice development process because she recognised that effective transformation required rigorous review before, during and following the process of change, alongside debate on the direction of development in clinical nursing. Sue was an exceptional leader whose kindness, intelligence and commitment to the development of nursing shone throughout her professional career. This, together with her generous encouragement, inspired me and many others.

Brendan

In the early part of 1991, I was interviewed for the post of Development Fellow/Clothworkers Foundation Clinical Lecturer in Nursing, to be based at Oxford City Community Hospital (OXCOMM). This was a shared appointment between the Institute of Nursing, Oxford Brookes University and Oxfordshire Community Health NHS Trust. I remember so well walking into the interview room at OXCOMM and being faced with three of the big names of nursing at that time – Shirley Williams, Ruth Champion and of course Sue Pembrey. Sue had used her amazing networking skills to secure significant income from the Clothworkers Foundation' (the charitable arm of The Clothworkers Company – an ancient livery company with a history of supporting the education of people who were disadvantaged and women, particularly in Oxford Colleges). These funds were at first intended to support the course leader for what was to be the first academic (Masters) nursing programme at Oxford University, with the clinical base at OXCOMM – which I was being interviewed to lead. But shortly before my interview, the programme was rejected by Oxford University and it moved to Oxford Brookes University instead – and the funding came with it! I was successful in my interview – not because I had all the knowledge, skill and expertise the panel was looking for, but because Sue in particular saw, as she said, 'something in me'. I am so very grateful to that intuition and for the many similar experiences I had over the seven years that followed. It is no exaggeration to say that I owe most of what I have achieved in my career to Sue. Without the intuition, insightfulness, graceful care, love, as well as the hard edge in challenging situations, that she showed me, I would never have been able to progress in the way that I have. While she gave me the autonomy I needed to grow, develop, make mistakes and truly flourish, her support never faltered. There will always be a special place in my heart for Sue and she will always remain my *anam cara*.

Angie

I met Sue in 1989 when she appointed me as a researcher at the newly founded Institute of Nursing in Oxford to work with Alison Binnie on a major action research study of the transition from task- to patient-centred nursing in an acute medical unit. Whenever Sue told people about my interview, she said it was the red leather boots I was wearing that clinched it! From Steve and Brendan's tributes, you can see that Sue had a talent for spotting and supporting people with great potential; people who have since taken practice development out into the world as a scholarly field of practice and research within and beyond nursing. I would, therefore, like to celebrate Sue, first as being a key founder of practice development who enabled those who would take it into the future. Second, I would like to honour Sue as a person-centred, political, strategic influencer and networker who shaped national, regional and local policy to sustain practice development work and excellence in nursing. Third, on a personal level, Sue has been a major inspiration, role model and dear friend in my work and life. Sue loved music and to dance and was a wonderful host and gifted healer, with a dazzling smile rivalling Julia Roberts'. We danced, drank wine, practised T'ai Chi, shared holidays, went to concerts and walked in silence in nature. Alongside my life, my career has flourished too through her sponsorship of my doctorate and her gifts of wisdom, humility, presence and generosity. So for me, Sue is not dead. Her gentle challenge and support, her grace, beauty, care and kindness have transformed me, intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually over many years, thus her presence is embodied in me. I believe that her presence lives on in others too.



*Radiating love
You made the world a better place
And your life blessed us*

A note on the Institute of Nursing

The Institute was set up with charitable funding as an independent organisation working in close partnership with Oxfordshire Health Authority. Sue developed key collaborative links with the University of Oxford, particularly the Faculty of Medicine and the Department of Educational Studies, and Oxford Polytechnic's (now Oxford Brookes University) Department of Health Care Studies. Links were also made with a number of national organisations, including the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), UK, and The King's Fund, London. In 1992, the Institute made a transition to becoming an independent, postgraduate national practice development and research unit. At this point, the RCN became one of four collaborating funding partners, alongside the Department of Health and the District and Regional Health Authorities. The new National Institute for Nursing also received support from a number of charitable organisations and research grant-awarding bodies. In the mid-1990s, the Institute merged with the RCN Institute of Advanced Nurse Education to become the RCN Institute. Practice development work and research was undertaken by a practice development team within the RCN Institute until 2007. The team was dissolved following the RCN's decision that the RCN Institute would no longer continue as a higher education institute but would instead become a learning and development institute. This restructure led to the loss of its specific focus on practice development.

References

- Pembrey, S. (1980) *The Ward Sister - Key to Nursing. A study of The Organisation of Individualised Nursing*. London: Royal College of Nursing (RCN research series).
- Pembrey, S. (1992) Introduction to the *Annual Report, 1991-1992*, Institute of Nursing, Oxford.