Uniform prescription

Most hospital workers wear colorful scrubs, making it hard for some to tell who's who

By LISA GUTIERREZ
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“If someone is walking into your room, you should know who your nurse is.”

— Diana Mason, editor in chief of American Journal of Nursing

Deborah Keys stands out among her nursing colleagues at St. Joseph Health Center.

She's the one, usually the only one, dressed all in white.

Most nurses haven't dressed like that in at least four decades. Now they wear scrubs — once relegated to the operating room — just like the lab technicians, the dietitians and the hospital housekeepers.

And it's quite the fashion parade, with nurses wearing scrub tops and jackets decorated with cartoon characters, Elvis, hearts and flowers, wizards and frogs, balloons and teddy bears, ghosts at Halloween and snowmen at Christmas.

But Keys, a nurse for 23 years, wears white out of personal preference, a symbol of the kind of care her patients can expect from her.

“Generally, I think patients want to look at their nurse and see a neat, clean appearance,” she says. “So when they look at me they see a sense of
Retro as it may seem, the look has been resurrected recently in two Atlanta-area medical centers, which now require nurses to suit up in the angelic whites. They recently made the switch to make it easier for patients to pick the nurses out of the crowds of other professionals wearing scrubs.

That's a widespread concern in many hospitals, although only a handful have addressed it by reverting to nurses' whites, and apparently none of the hospitals in Kansas City has considered such a change.

Ever since nurses shed the white, patients have complained that nurses are unrecognizable, says Diana Mason, editor in chief of American Journal of Nursing, the official journal of the American Nurses Association.

Mason addressed the identity crisis earlier this year in an AJN editorial titled "Who's the RN?"

"It used to be you could identify the nurse by the white cap, the white hose, the white shoes. One of the major objections is, if everyone is wearing (scrubs), how do you know who your nurse is?" Mason says.

"If someone is walking into your room, you should know who your nurse is."

Though they're hardly the gravest challenge facing the nursing profession, uniforms cause ongoing debate. White is a stark contrast to today's colorful and fanciful scrubs. The mere thought of wearing white leaves some nurses seeing red.

"It would be absolutely ridiculous," says Valerie Johnson, a registered nurse at St. Joseph. "Who would clean them?"

Ironically, the first nurses' uniforms were designed so that the nurses wouldn't be mistaken for housekeepers.

"RN: The Past, Present and Future of the Nurses' Uniform," an exhibit earlier this year at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, traced the uniform's incarnations.

The first standard nursing uniform was used by Bellevue Hospital Training School in New York in 1874. There would have been no "ER" histrionics like jumping onto a gurney in a floor-length dress with long sleeves, starched collars and cuffs and long pinafore-style apron.

The uniform was blue- or gray-striped calico for the summer, dark blue or gray wool in the winter. By the 1890s, student nurses began wearing blue-and-white seersucker, and graduate nurses switched to all-white. Caps and pins or badges identified their nursing schools.

The pure-white, starched, pristinely laundered uniform became a symbol of hygiene and professionalism. But as street fashions evolved, so did the nurse's uniform. Sleeves and hems got shorter. Man-made, easy-care fabrics were used.

Then two things happened: the rebellious '60s, and men in the profession. The flower-child generation didn't like wearing the traditional white uniform and cap because it exuded a submissive image. Goodbye, all white.

And that cap. "We were rebelling against having to wear this cap that did get in the way," Mason says. "If you were working on ICU or had different equipment overhead, the cap got in the way."

Beginning in the '70s, operating-room scrubs — unisex and comfortable — began migrating into other parts of the hospital.

Today, scrubs are not just operating-room green. Walk into any uniform store, such as Uniforms, P.R.N. Inc. in Overland Park, and you'll find scrub tops decorated with Strawberry Shortcake, yellow smiley faces, pink hearts, cats and dogs, moons and stars. Tops and pants come in gem colors of order when their life is out of order."
turquoise and emerald and sapphire, even chic black. Some uniforms glow in the dark.

"Would it be nice to see everybody all looking alike? It would be nice. But you have to allow your staff to have some individuality in an environment that is kind of high-stress," says Sherry Rakes, senior vice president of nursing at Olathe Medical Center.

Problems arise, however, when patients get confused when everyone, from the nurse to the person bringing in the breakfast tray, walks around in scrubs. One Kansas City nurse characterized the problem as "mass confusion."

It happens with some older patients, Rakes says, who "will say, 'I don't know who the nurse is, they don't wear the white anymore.' I think it's a comfort zone for the patients because so many people wear scrubs."

Sometimes, a nametag isn't enough, especially when a nurse's name is printed twice as big and bold as her title. In some cases, nurse badges don't even list titles.

"That is an issue to us, the appropriate identification of nurses," says Joan Hurwitz, communications director for the American Nurses Association in Silver Spring, Md.

"At different institutions over the years there has been a dilution of titles. We've even heard ... where some were saying registered nurses could not identify themselves as registered nurses."

In many hospital rooms now, the name of the nurse is posted in the room. And hospitals encourage their nurses to make better personal connections with each patient with formal introductions.

But the American Journal of Nursing believes it has another way to solve the problem, an idea it borrowed from the recent uniform exhibit at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia.

Along with the exhibit, the museum surveyed 800 nursing students, working nurses and retirees to create an "ideal" uniform. There was little consensus, beyond a desire for more pockets and easier-care, durable fabrics.

But nurses loved the patch.

The exhibit's creators designed an "RN" patch — red letters embroidered on a white background. It harkens to a time when nursing schools issued patches to their graduates, who then wore them on their uniforms.

Now, the American Journal of Nursing has begun campaigning for uniform makers to make the patches available on uniforms they sell to nurses.

"We believe this could be a simple yet elegant solution to nursing's identity crisis," Mason co-wrote in the magazine's April editorial.

Whether the patches catch on, they'll probably be more popular than the old-school look, which has attracted near-uniform disapproval since the Atlanta hospitals made their moves. Recent comments posted to an online nursing forum rejected the notion and were easily summed up in one nurse's note:

"I don't think white uniforms are the answer to the nursing crisis. I don't dismiss any nurse who wants to wear them, but I don't identify my nursing experience or skill by what I wear, but by what I do. If I'm sick, I don't care what my nurse is wearing as long as my needs are met."

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Learn more
Get with the patch

RN: The Past, Present and Future of the Nurses’ Uniform, is a book based on the exhibit of the same name presented earlier this year at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. $15.95. Call (215) 568-1111.

Learn more
Get with the patch

RN uniform patches, designed by Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, are available for $2 each (minimum order of three patches unless combined with other merchandise) from the Center for Nursing Advocacy in Baltimore. Call (410) 323-1100 or visit truthaboutnursing.org