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THE HISTORY OF THE NURSING PROFESSION IN CAMEROON

Nursing has been called “the oldest of art and the youngest of the professions “ reason being that the history of Nursing care can be traced back to the beginning of human kind. For as long as there has been human life and interactions, there has been a constant need for care and comfort to fellow humans inflicted by injury or suffering from illness (Dr Theofanidis D, Prof Despina, 2015). Nursing in Cameroon has been going through its own evolution from the colonial Era to present day. However according to Dr Maboh Michel N., the absence of empirical data makes it difficult to ascertain the nature of this evolution. Before the arrival of modern nursing during the colonial Era, the care of patients in different tribes and villages were in the hands of “medicine men and women”. These people were believed to possess spiritual powers and deep knowledge of herbs and other rituals and their role in diagnosing and treating both physical and spiritual ailments. This “traditional medicine” is believed to have components that could be taught through apprenticeship and others that could only be transferred to a successor spiritually following instructions from the ancestors. Problems of fertility and pregnancy were managed by the traditional doctors while issues of delivery and postpartum care were handled by traditional birth attendants who were usually elderly women. They received no formal training and may have learned by apprenticeship. In this Era, the profession of Nursing did not exist in Cameroon until the arrival of the missionaries and colonialists in the late 19th century (Dr Maboh Michel N). When describing the history of Nursing profession, we are equally talking of Nursing Education and how it came about. Nursing Education in Cameroon can be traced back to the start of the colonial Era. When the Germans annexed Cameroon in 1884, they trained a type of medical personnel called “Dressers”. A dresser was a surgeon’s assistant whose duty was to dress wounds and sores. When the Germans left, Cameroon was partitioned into French and British Cameroon by the French and British who came to Cameroon. The first school to train nurses aides was opened by Dr Eugene Jamot in 1930 in the French part of Cameroon, the training lasted three months and these graduates helped him in his fight against sleeping sickness. Then the training evolved to health assistants who were trained for three years and performed both medical and nursing roles, they were therefore described as “nurses”, and it wasn’t until 1959 that a formal curriculum based on the French model was introduced. Meanwhile in British Cameroon after the Germans left, they continued using the services of Dressers when they opened the African hospital in Victoria by 1933. During this time, training for nurses was only available in Nigeria and since the British managed their territory as part of Nigeria it was easy for Cameroonians to study in Nigeria. It was in 1954 that the first training school was started by the Catholic mission at Shisong in British Cameroon. The school trained staff nurses in a three year programme. These schools were all hospital based as there was no University based program at the time. All the nursing programmes were under the Ministry of Public Health. Entry into practice is still based on the three years Diploma which can now be obtained from both the ministries of Public Health and Higher Education (Dr Maboh M.N). One can say Nursing is a profession based on the characteristics of a profession. However, there are still some arguments of whether Nursing is a Profession in Cameroon.