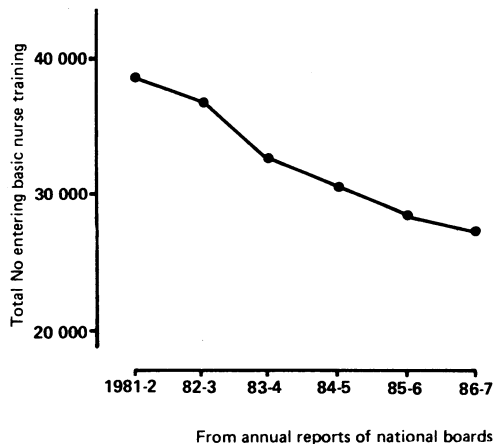


Retention

Some vacancies, particularly for skilled nurses, occur because of "poaching" by the private sector. An estimated 1000 nurses left the NHS for this sector in 1985,²¹ and with the increase in private medicine since then this year's figure will be higher. Three



Total numbers entering basic nurse training between 1981-2 and 1986-7 in the United Kingdom.

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in four of the nurses had some specialist training, all of it paid for by the National Health Service. In recent years increasing numbers of trained nurses have been recruited from Britain by other countries.

Vicious circle

The sequence that runs poor morale, "seriously considering leaving," left is, of course, not limited to nursing, but what is currently happening in nursing is that this sequence has turned into a circle.

Persistent staff shortages of 20-25%, for whatever reason, mean an increased workload or "stress" for the staff who remain, which in turn affects morale. Eventually more staff leave and the workload increases further. The same thing can happen if better staff complements are being maintained with a high proportion of agency staff, who may be on the ward for only a single shift.

For any improvement in the nursing crisis this circle needs to be broken. In the next article I will discuss pay.



WORDS IRIS. The miracle and splendour of the rainbow, its intangibility and its silence, cannot have failed to imbue our remote ancestors with a sense of communion with the deity.

And God said unto Noah, "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."

The ancient Greeks, too, regarded it as a sign of divine intervention. Iris was the messenger of the Gods and the rainbow was her sign. Hence, *iris* is Greek for rainbow. The rainbow was demythologised by de Dominis, who in 1611 explained the optical principles underlying its manifestation. These were further developed by Descartes, and the colours were explained by Newton. It is the great variety of colours found in flowers of the genus *iridaceae* that is responsible for the botanical epithet *iris*. Incidentally, *orris* (a corruption of *iris*) root, made from the dried rhizome of certain *iris* varieties, is an ingredient of some toilet powders, but has declined in popularity because of its allergenic potential. It has a fragrant violet-like aroma. The metal iridium was so named "from the striking variety of colours it gives, while dissolving in marine (hydrochloric) acid."

The iris of the eye seems to have been so called from the variety of colours that are to be seen in different individuals. *The Oxford English Dictionary* quotes Jerome of Brunswick's *Surgery* (1525) (translation): "There be iij materyall circles y' ronne about the iye and because they be so different of colours they be callyd yride(s) or rain bowys." It is tempting to assume that the iris was also so named from the resemblance of its roundel to the arc of the rainbow. But one would be lucky to see anything approaching even a semicircle at dawn or sunset, and in flat countryside. A complete circular rainbow, however, would have been a rarity and visible only from mountain tops; nowadays, of course, from aeroplanes. Does the individual iris change colour? Some people believe that it can do so under the influence of emotion.

It is perhaps conceivable that contraction of the pupil in a grey iris might disclose a deeper layer of blue between the fibres. If so, then exposure to light should do the same. This may be just a popular myth. The anatomical iris has the same or closely allied name in most languages. As well as *Iris*, German has the alternative *Regenbogenhaut*, literally "rainbowskin." Hence, the surgical instrument, the iridectome, may be either *Iridektom* or (take a deep breath) *Regenbogenhautausschälungsmesser*. This is merely six words joined together.

Imitating the action of the iris of the eye, the iris diaphragm of the camera lens maintains a circular central hole of variable size. It was first used in cameras in the mid-1880s. But a similar device was invented by Robert Hooke, that most ingenious of English experimenters and inventors. In 1662 he was appointed curator of experiments to the Royal Society, and was under contract to demonstrate new experiments every week. The Royal Society's records for 27 July 1681 state, "Mr Hooke shewed his new contrived aperture for long telescopes, which would open and close just like the pupil of a man's eye, leaving a round hole in the middle of the glass of any size desired; which was well approved of." Good for you, Robert!—B J FREEDMAN.

Correction

ABC of Dermatology: rashes arising in the dermis

We regret that an error occurred in this article by Dr P K Buxton (21 November, p 1332). In the box on causes of "toxic" erythema the section on infections should have read: "any recent viral or bacterial infection such as streptococcal throat infection."