

Jill Alcorn,
Thursday Morning,
Australian History.

Nursing from 1929-1978.

Miss Mary Knodler - Interviewed by
Jill Alcorn.

Mary (Molly) Knodler was born in 1907 at Maison Dieu, near Singleton, the daughter of a farming family and longtime residents of the area. She obtained her schooling at Maison Dieu school, which was a mile and a half walk away. On leaving school, Molly helped on the farm. Later she travelled to England to attend the wedding of her sister. She remained there for twelve months. When she returned home she fulfilled a longed held wish to start training as a nurse. This would take her four years.

At the age of twenty nine, in 1937, she commenced her training at the Newcastle General Hospital, later known as The Royal Newcastle Hospital. The junior uniform consisted of a mauve striped dress (the seniors wore blue) a large starched apron, belt, starched collar (which rubbed the neck badly) cuffs, black shoes and stockings and a cap.

Because there were no tutor sisters at this time, a junior nurse took her to sign on at 5.30am and showed Molly her duties. The first ward she was assigned to was Ward Two. This was a surgical ward with 28 beds. All of the patients were to be sponged, beds made, lockers dusted, tables and chairs placed in their exact positions and the floors swept with a millet broom before 7.00am, when breakfast was served. Meals were delivered to the Day Room, where the sister in charge served out the portions. These were carried on large trays to the patients by the nurses, who were required to inform sister of each patient's name, complaint and diet.

After breakfast, the floor was again swept (as it was after every meal) and work continued until 10.30am. If all tasks were completed satisfactorily, the nurse would ask for a morning pass and then have a break from duties. She would be required to go to first dinner and be back in the ward at 2.00pm. Later, a half an hour tea break would be taken and then it was back to the ward until 9.00pm.

All meals were eaten in the Dining Room at the table allocated to your particular year of training. Fraternisation with other year students was frowned on. Wages were low with a mere ten shillings per week being paid for a six day week. All nurses lived in the nurses' home where each nurse was allocated a single room. Soiled linen and uniforms were handed in on Mondays to the Home Sister and new ones allocated that day. The doors to the home were locked at 10.00pm, unless you had a late pass, which entitled you to stay out until 11.00pm. These hours restricted the girls social life and they mainly found their fun with each other.

The first year nurse was at the bottom of the ladder and her tasks consisted mainly of menial jobs such as cleaning. This entailed the cleaning of the Pan Room, where everything was scoured thoroughly, boiled and returned to its' proper place.

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The nurses attended lectures given by the doctors. Many nurses found themselves going to sleep in class because of the constant race to beat the clock and the very hard work performed.

Matron was a very authoritarian figure and if a nurse committed a misdemeanor, she was sent to be interviewed by her. This could be a very daunting experience for the young nurses. A written report was asked for if the deed was sufficiently serious.

After completing the four years of training, Molly went on to complete her Midwifery training, at the King George V hospital in Sydney. Later World War II commenced and Molly was needed at home to help run the farm and look after her elderly parents. Petrol rationing was to cause many problems, but the purchase of a horse enabled her to traverse the farm without the need for petrol. Molly helped when possible at the Fairholme Hospital in Singleton, and after the war again commenced nursing full time there. She transferred to the Maitland Hospital in the late 1950s, where she was Outpatients Sister for many years.

Molly has observed many great changes both in patient care and the use of drugs, over the forty years of her nursing career. Those patients being operated on for a hernia were required to stay flat on their backs for three weeks without a pillow. Now most patients are out of bed the next day and are better for it. After a cataract operation the patient was also laid flat on his back with no pillow and a sand bag on either side of the head. In the present era, these patients are usually sent home the next day.

Early in Molly's career, heroin and morphine were commonly used drugs and big changes were noticed after Penicillin became widely available. The Rh factor was a new discovery, a question on which was included in her final exams. There have been vast improvements in pre-natal and neo-natal care, with the invention of foetal monitors and tests such as amniocentesis now available. Infectious diseases such as diphtheria, scarlet fever and whooping cough are no longer the scourge of children and the former infectious wards and hospitals are put to other uses.

The status of nurses has also undergone big changes, with nursing now regarded as a profession, and wages and conditions now much improved.

Molly Knodler retired from nursing in 1978 with much regret, as she loved her work and would, she assures me, do it all over again.