

# **An historical overview of nursing struggles in South Africa**

The first available historical record of involvement of blacks in nursing dates back to the period 1685-1825. In the 18th century, nursing involved private work without the strict regimentation and rigid supervision of labour as is found today in modern hospitals. Colonial settlers in the Cape used male slaves for nursing duties.

The development of capitalism made for far-reaching changes in the health sector. It affected the distribution of health services, the position of health workers and the division of labour in the health service. Health services, as far as the labour process was concerned, became organised along the lines of a factory. In addition, technological development changed the position and the skill requirements of health workers. The need arose for a trained, skilled and stable labour force of nurses.

## **Chronology**

**1891** - South African nurses were able to achieve professional status in the Cape Province.

**1913** - South African Trained Nurses' Association (SATNA) was formed. The original aims were to promote the professional interests of nurses and to suppress the practice of nursing by unqualified persons.

**1925** - South Africa's first medical council was formed and nurses were represented by two delegates.

**1940's** - Few black nurses were trained. The reasons were poor schooling and widespread discrimination against black nurses enrolling for nursing courses.

**1942** - The General Workers' Union held a series of meetings in the Johannesburg Hospital to discuss organising nurses into a trade union. SATNA opposed unionisation. When the union was about to be formed and the launch was planned, SATNA began a nationwide membership drive to enlist the support of parliamentarians and other influential people for a Nursing Act that would make

unionisation of nurses impossible. A draft Bill was made for a nurses' association with compulsory membership, denying nurses the freedom of association.

**1944** - The aforementioned Bill was passed as Act 45 of 1944.

**1949** - Student nurses at Victoria Hospital in Lovedale went on strike in support of a colleague who was unfairly suspended, apparently because she had taken part in a petition complaining about aspects of the hospital. After the parents intervened and made representation on behalf of the nurses, to the Hospital Board, the nurses went back to work. Later that year, another crisis occurred at the same hospital when nurses refused to attend certain religious meetings. Eventually the superintendent had the hospital closed as a training hospital for nurses.

**1958** - The government ordered that all nurses required pass-book numbers in order to register for nursing or to do further courses in their training. The Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League opposed pass-books for women and organised a public protest campaign. Over 200 women attended a protest meeting inside Baragwanath Hospital.

**1959** - The South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) started a Hospital Workers Union and began organising in Durban and Cape Town.

**1960** - White nurses supported the black unskilled hospital workers who were striking at Karl Brenner Hospital in Stellenbosch for better wages and working conditions.



**In the 1940s, due to racial discrimination and poor schooling, few black nurses were trained. 'Bantu education' continues to place blacks at a disadvantage**



**With the development of capitalism, health services became organised along the lines of a factory**

**1961 -** A strike was organised by the Hospital Workers Union at King George TB Hospital in Durban to protest an incident of corporal punishment of nurses by a matron. Skilled and unskilled workers supported the demands that the matron be fired. They furthermore demanded equal eating facilities, proper food, the establishment of an employment insurance fund and an end to racial discrimination in the hospital services. Over 300 hospital workers participated in the two week strike. As the police cordoned off the hospital, the strikers were supported with food from the local community. The strike also received international support. Some of their demands were met, others ignored. Twenty-one of the strikers were fired.

**1978 -** The Nursing Bill, published in 1977 was enacted in 1978. Although the act makes provision for a non-racial Nursing Council, only registered nurses who are "South African citizens" are represented. This excludes many black nurses who are, in terms of South African law, "citizens of independent homelands".

**1979 -** According to the 1979 Race Relations' Survey "dissatisfaction among nurses over low salaries and poor working conditions was rife. In October it was reported that approximately 200 nurses employed at the old and new Johannesburg General Hospitals had resigned because of low salaries, late pay cheques and poor working conditions. The report was denied by the hospital authorities but nurses interviewed the following day said the reported figure was correct".

**1973** - Student midwives at McCord's Hospital went on strike for higher salaries. They were earning less than R40 a month.

**1979/80** - Hospital workers' organisations were formed in Natal, the Transvaal and the Cape. They aimed to break down barriers between health workers by bringing them together in one organisation. These organisations accept all hospital workers as members, regardless of their skills and level of training.

**1981** - Reports from various newspapers indicated growing shortages of nursing staff in all the major provincial hospitals in the country. The 1981 Race Relations Survey stated: "many black nurses were unemployed because while there were enough jobs to go round, work that was available was for white nurses only. There had been a 'brain drain' in this sector to such an extent that hundreds of beds and many wards had been closed. Another problem was that many African nurses from homelands that had accepted independence were being categorised as 'foreign'. This meant they could not be registered with the South African Nursing Council, and consequently they had difficulty in finding work". SASPU National of July 1981 maintained that "... the employment of black nurses in white hospitals would enable the state to reopen facilities and to run them at a lower cost. This was because there were considerable differences between the salaries of black nurses and white nurses".

**1981** - A Race Relations Survey reported that nurses were financially worse off than in 1971, but the South African Nursing Association was "powerless to help them". "This was because the board members of the Association were employed by the provincial authorities and were therefore unable to make realistic salary demands." The Survey also reported that "in 1970 a student nurse earned a gross monthly salary of R110, while a newly qualified sister was paid R170 per month. Ten years later, the latter was being paid R265 (starting salary) and could expect to receive R433 after three years. A sister trained in midwifery could expect R472.50, while a qualified senior clinical matron would be paid R1 076 per month". This had not kept up with the 178% increase in the cost of living over the same period. Using these figures, it was concluded that the student nurse and the qualified sister were worse off by approximately R40 per month than in 1970.

Nurses' salaries were increased by 12% in April. According to the minister, parity had been achieved in the salary scales for chief matrons of all races. The minister said sisters would get increases of up to 20% and the overall rate for all nurses would be doubled. This meant the monthly pay of a sister would rise between R73 and R120. The new salaries would therefore range between R439 and R737 per month.

Student nurses would get a 12% increase to bring their pay scales up to between R243 and R334 per month.

**1982** - Nurses opposed forced segregation into separate homeland nursing associations, and white nurses' domination of the organisation.

**1982** - The Nursing Amendment Bill was described widely as being designed to deprive nurses in 'self-governing states' of their right to belong to South African nursing associations. The bureaucracy involved in these nurses applying for work within those areas recognised by the government as being 'part of the Republic' would exacerbate the nursing shortage.

**1982** - Nurses and other staff members called a boycott of Baragwanath Hospital canteens to protest the poor food provided by the hospital. They claimed they had been served "worm-filled" porridge. Other grievances were that none of the staff had contracts to protect them and some were not being paid for their overtime work.

About one month previously, nurses at Hillbrow Hospital in Johannesburg held a one day boycott to protest what they described as "dirty" food. The dispute began after a student nurse was refused a job that she was originally accepted for. The hospital authorities, according to the nurses, told her to leave because they did not want trade unionists working at the hospital. The spokesperson said: "The real reason is that she was the unofficial spokesperson for a group of midwives." About 100 staff members who then met to discuss the incident, decided to take up more general grievances and the boycott started.

**1982** - Resident nurses at Coronation Hospital in Coronationville refused to eat at the hospital residence in protest against the quality of food served there (described by a nurse as being "not even fit for the dogs") as well as the filthy condition of the diningroom.



**Over the years, nurses have held many boycotts to protest the poor quality of hospital food**

**1982** - A Galshewe women was rejected from Sebokeng Hospital in Vereeniging because she had a Bophuthatswana travel document. On the second day of her employment as a student nurse, she was told to leave as she had a homeland document. The superintendent said it was common knowledge that student nurses from "foreign countries" could not be accepted without prior permission from from their governments. She was later reinstated.

**1984** - The Race Relations Survey quotes Mr D Kirstein, member of the executive committee for hospital services, as saying that African student nurses employed by the Transvaal Provincial Administration earned nearly 30% less than their white counterparts and 26% less than 'coloured' and Indian nurses. Salaries paid to African sisters were 16,6% lower than those of white sisters and 7% less than their 'coloured' and Indian counterparts.

The survey also reports that "according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), developing countries needed at least two registered nurses per 1 000 people in order to render a basic health service. However, according to the South African Nursing Association (SANA), South Africa had only 1,5 African, 1,8 'coloured' and 1,4 Indian nurses for every 1 000 people". (These figures probably do not include the homelands.) "SANA said that the figure for whites was 6 registered nurses for 1 000 people," the survey continued.



**'Homelands'** - the Nursing Amendment Bill was described widely as being designed to deprive nurses in 'self-governing states' of their right to belong to South African nursing associations

**1985** - 900 nurse aids, cleaners, messengers and kitchen staff at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto staged an hour long stoppage over wages, service conditions and a curfew for student nurses. On 13 November 1985, provincial authorities said demands would only be considered in March 1986. The next day, police arrested 840 workers and charged them with attending an illegal gathering. On 18 November 1985, the hospital authorities fired 1 700 nurses and auxiliary workers. The South African Defence Force medical personnel took over many of the hospital's essential services. Nurses' negotiations with authorities on their grievances broke down after intimidation of nurses by security guards and police. Nurses were given 24 hours to vacate hostels. Three student nurses brought urgent court applications to halt their eviction from the hostels and to declare the dismissals invalid. Their application was successful and the dismissals of all the nurses (except one) were overturned. The court took the view that a mechanism should be set up to allow nurses to air their grievances. Wage increases were backdated to 1 November 1985. The Health Workers Association played an important role in helping the strikers.

**1985** - South African Black and Allied Municipal Workers Union (SABMAWU) represented a nurse dismissed from Katlehong Health Clinic. The court found that the City Council had not held a proper inquiry into the conduct of the nurse before dismissing her. The City Council did not contest the action.

**1985** - A survey by SANA found that hundreds of nurses throughout SA were forced to take part-time employment over and above their normal duties in order to make ends meet. The survey found that at least 10% of nurses had a second job and some were working 18 hour days. The figure of 10% was thought to be an underestimation as 'moonlighting' is officially frowned upon and many nurses therefore were not admitting to having a second job.

**1985** - Newspaper reports from the early part of this year claimed nurses at the Johannesburg Hospital were bitter about being forced to work overtime without extra pay because of the provincial austerity campaign to cut costs by R28 million. The Director of Hospital Services told *The Star* that "although there is no pay increase for this extra time, the nurses and staff have responded magnificently". Nurses, however, denied this vehemently, saying that they were forced to work unpaid overtime.

**1985** - In August, sixteen African nursing sisters, employed at Baragwanath Hospital (for black patients), were transferred to the white Johannesburg Hospital. The superintendent of the Johannesburg Hospital said the transfer was necessary because of shortages of senior and qualified white skilled nurses willing to work for provincial institutions. *The Star* newspaper alleged that skilled and experienced African nurses were being drawn from Baragwanath, with a bed occupancy of over 100%, to nurse white patients in the Johannesburg Hospital, with a bed occupancy of under 50%. The member of the executive committee (MEC) for hospital services

said the African nursing sisters who had been transferred were being replaced by African nurses without specialist training. *The Star* reported that nurses at Baragwanath were complaining that the result would be inferior health care of black patients.

**1985** - According to reports in the *City Press*, an overwhelming majority of kwaZulu nurses threatened to strike if the kwaZulu Nurses Association forced them to pay R50 of their pay towards the construction of the Association's new administrative offices. They claimed the Association, in collaboration with the kwaZulu Department of Health, was trying to force them to pay for "separate development".

**1985** - Nurses at Westvaal Hospital in Orkney (owned by the Anglo American Corporation) refused to eat hospital food until their demands were met. Their grievances included the rental of rooms at the hospital and the poor quality of food.

**1986** - In March, the South African Nursing Council rejected the establishment of trade unions in the nursing profession. The president of the council argued that unions were unacceptable for ethical reasons and would harm the professionalism of nursing.

**1986** - In May, nine student nurses appeared before a disciplinary committee of the South African Nurses Council (SANC) on charges of disgraceful and improper conduct arising out of the November 1985 strike. The principal matron at Baragwanath said in mitigation that the strike had been caused by desperation and that the student nurses had attempted to speak to hospital authorities but had been turned away. She said the strike had been the "only way" in which nurses had been able to express their anger "with the least harm to people and property". The Disciplinary Committee found the nurses guilty of disgraceful and improper conduct and cautioned them.

**1986** - Nursing staff from the Edendale Hospital in Natal complained to the press that notices were handed out informing them that each nurse would have R34 deducted from the salaries of over 1 688 nurses to pay for the tea they had received over a particular time from the hospital. The nurses complained to the authorities, informing them that they would rather not have tea. The Medical Superintendent said they must pay back the kwaZulu government and warned that "nurses need not rush to the paper if they have a complaint but should follow the channels of communication which are open to them".

**1986** - Scenes of anger outside the Johannesburg Hospital were reported by *The Citizen* newspaper when nurses received their July salaries. Residence fees had been increased by about 31% and backdated to April, leading to a lump sum deduction in July. Nurses claimed that the residence fee increase "wiped out" a pay increase given in April that year.



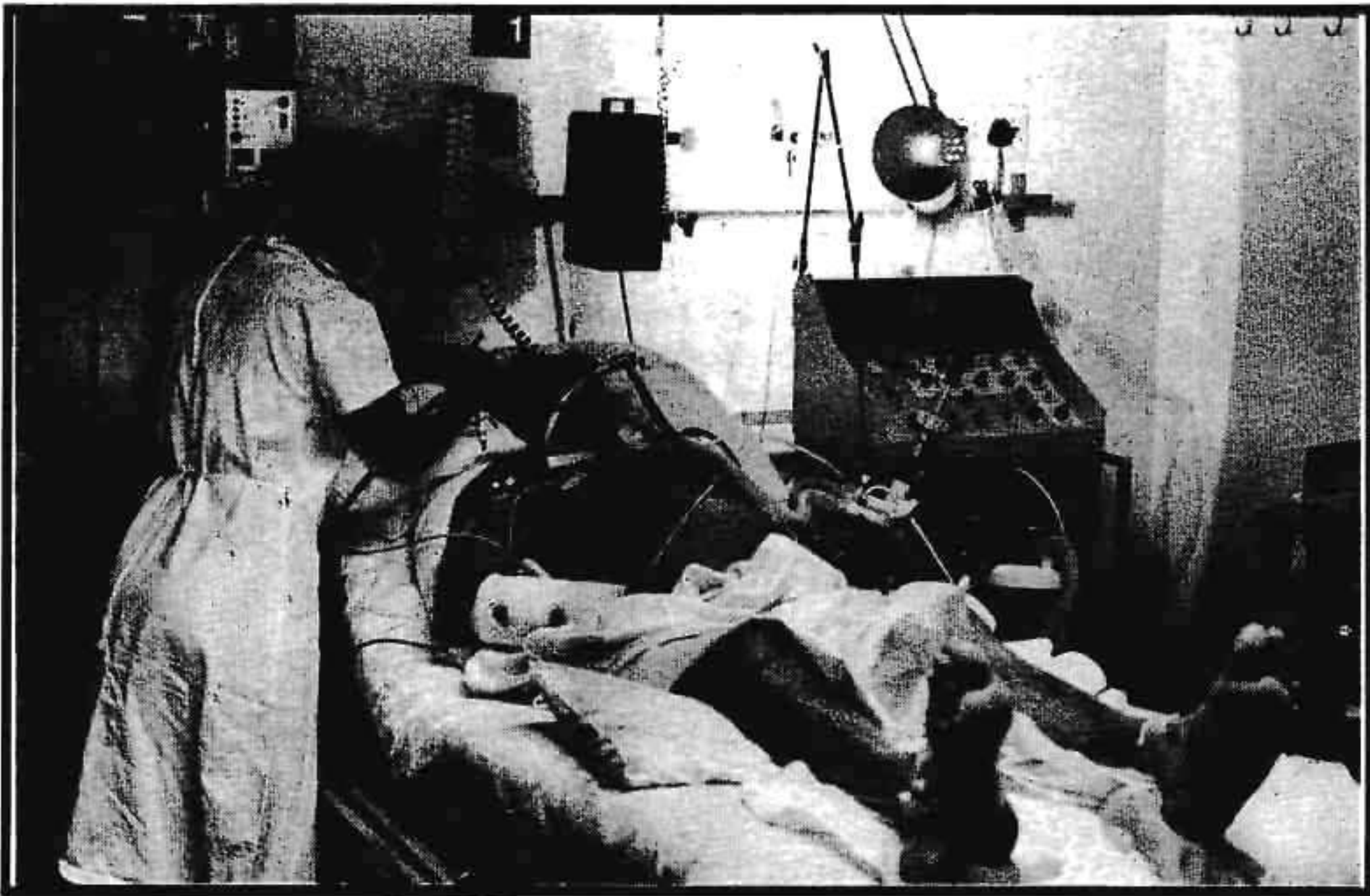


**In 1986 nurses at the Shifa Hospital in Durban joined cleaners to protest low wages and poor living and working conditions**

**1986** - Nurses and cleaners from the privately owned Shifa Hospital in Durban went on strike to protest low wages and poor living conditions. The strikers returned to work after directors offered wage increases and better working conditions from January. The strikers were represented by NEHAWU.

**1987** - Nurses and cleaning staff at the above hospital staged a wave of protests against the dismissal of 35 hospital workers. According to nurses at the hospital, the hospital authorities failed to follow prescribed retrenchment procedures. Nurses were represented by NEHAWU. They demanded adequate compensation by way of severance pay and long-service benefits. Negotiations were being held with the Medical Superintendent.

**1987** - About 400 student nurses from Thembisa Hospital went on strike to protest poor food and discrimination at the hospital. Nurses claimed harassment and intimidation from hospital security, as well as racist practices by hospital administration. Meanwhile, 600 nurses and student nurses boycotted hospital food after the superintendent refused an invitation to inspect the dining hall.



**Despite protests from the black community, nurses from black hospitals have been transferred to the Johannesburg Hospital to alleviate a white nursing shortage**

**1987 - Several hundred nurses at Baragwanath Hospital started a boycott of hospital canteen food when dining fees were increased. Nurses claimed the quality of food was bad and refused to pay the increase.**

**1987 - With the help of HWA, maternity nurses at Baragwanath Hospital won their demands. This issue is dealt with in detail in this edition of *Critical Health*.**

**1988 - Nurses from Baragwanath and Hillbrow Hospitals in Johannesburg complained to the press that they were being told either to lose weight or lose their jobs. It was apparently alleged that "fat nurses fall asleep on the job".**

## **References**

The above information has been collated from *Critical Health* No.15, the South African Institute of Race Relations Surveys, *Work in Progress* and newspaper clippings.

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