



# EXPLORING THE

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THE TALK OF THE DAY WAS NURSING HISTORY. The place was Rochester General Hospital (RGH) in Rochester, New York. The speaker was Dr. Cynthia Connolly, nurse historian, political activist and faculty member at YSN. The audience was diverse; nursing managers, staff, and directors were joined by the hospital's house officers and other physicians. Their backgrounds varied a great deal as did their views about the subject matter. As a number of house officers were trained abroad, their understanding of nursing history was rooted in their past practice environments and the established norms for nurse-physician interaction within those settings. For a number of them, the talk provided a first opportunity to consider the historic contributions of nursing to the advancement of health care in the United States.

Dr. Connolly stepped up to the podium. "History is our cultural DNA," she began. "It is an ongoing exploration of our values, actions, and struggles. History is also a great teacher. It teaches us that not all of our problems are unique. While history can't predict the future or find the magical solution to all of our problems, it can feed our intuition, and help us understand how we got to where we are, which may help us to better analyze our current situation and plan for the future."

The idea for the RGH lecture series evolved from a conversation Dr. Connolly had with Deborah Zimmermann, RN, MS, the hospital's senior vice president and chief nursing officer. Ms. Zimmermann had attended Dr. Connolly's presentation of a research paper at the University of Rochester in 2003. Following that presentation, she invited Dr. Connolly to speak to nursing staff and physicians at the hospital about the past as a way of providing a template for RGH to use in developing a vision for nursing care in the 21st century. Dr. Connolly recalled: "I was very excited at the prospect of speaking to such a diverse group of (health care) professionals about how the study of nursing history could help them better prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future."

Dr. Connolly conducted three distinct sessions at RGH, repeated several times. Her morning talk was to nursing managers, directors, and advanced practice nurses. She sketched out the history of nursing nationally and regionally against the backdrop of American history and chose several historical cases to dissect the themes of leadership and courage with relevant contemporary questions. "One striking theme when taking an historical snapshot of 1904 and 2004 is how much hasn't changed," Dr. Connolly said. "Nowhere is this truer than in health care. As we are caught up in today's hectic world, we often think things have never been more challenging and that the world in general and health care in particular, has never faced such crises. In fact, our nurse forebears faced equivalent issues one hundred years ago."

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# CULTURAL DNA OF NURSING





Dr. Cynthia Connolly in Yale's Historical Medical Library Reading Room

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Dr. Connolly's noontime talk was to nursing staff, house officers, and other physicians. She presented an overview of nursing history with an emphasis on the way race, class, and gender have influenced the development of health care in general, and nursing specifically. As part of this presentation, she discussed the evolution of the relationship between nurses and physicians. “It is impossible to historically contextualize nursing without considering changing ideas about illness, the growth of hospitals, and other professions such as medicine,” she said. “Nursing and medicine have always been interdependent... but there are critical differences between the two professions and issues related to the distribution of work and authority. These are easier to understand when viewed through the lens of history.” She concluded the talk by pointing to recent collaborative triumphs by nurse and physician groups: “Some of the historic distrust between the two professional groups is abating as more and more a new generation of nurses and physicians unite to fight to provide quality care, whether it be nursing or medical, to their patients,” she said.

Dr. Connolly's evening talk was to the Finger Lakes Organization of Nurse Executives and was not purely historical. Rather, she talked about her work in Senator Paul Wellstone's office and the way in which nurses are viewed on Capitol Hill. In 1992, during candidate Bill Clinton's first election campaign, Dr. Connolly became very interested in his health care reform agenda. She recalled: “I kept wondering, how in the world have we gotten to where we are? We had such wonderful new technologies and excellent health care for the few, yet so many segments of the populations were lacking basic health care services. Some good solutions were being discussed, but I didn't think we could figure out how to move beyond the crisis until we knew what had gotten us to this point.” That was the impetus for Dr. Connolly's interest in public policy. “I saw history not as an end in itself, but rather, as a living and breathing organism that informed policy and practice,” she said.

In 2001, as part of her post doctoral fellowship in the Program in the

History of Medicine and Public Health at Columbia University, Dr. Connolly decided to complement her research with a “policy clinical.” She expressed her interest in a letter to the late Senator Paul Wellstone [D-Minn], the legislator she admired most. “Paul was an activist Senator...I really respected what he stood for and thought I could use my knowledge of history and my clinical background to help further his legislative agenda,” she said. Dr. Connolly’s letter could not have arrived at a better time. The Democratic Party was newly energized, health care was high on the legislators’ priority list, and there was an immediate need for scholars who brought to the debate a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical know how. Dr. Connolly was awarded a 6-month fellowship in Senator Wellstone’s office beginning in the summer of 2001. “I was a middle aged nurse and historian [not looking to party on the DC scene] who would cost them nothing,” she recalled. “It was a good match from the start, and I was thrilled at the chance to become more involved.”

On Capitol Hill, Dr. Connolly placed contemporary health care issues into historical context for current legislative action, wrote speeches and remarks for the Senator, and briefed him and other legislators and their staff on the substance of particular issues and pieces of legislation. “In some offices, fellows don’t do much,” she explained. “In Senator Wellstone’s, I was given a chance to do as much as I wanted so quickly that I soon found myself deep in the middle of a debate on some of the most pressing health care issues of the day. You haven’t lived until you’ve felt that power.”

Dr. Connolly’s presentation to the Lakes Organization of Nurse Executives was very much about power; how to get access to it, and how to use it to instigate social change. “The Senate demystified our society’s power structure for me,” she said. “It showed me ways in which individuals and groups committed to their cause and determined to see change can create opportunities and get results.” Dr. Connolly also spoke about how she saw history used [and not used] in Washington, and discussed the need to increase the numbers of nurses working in staff positions on Capitol Hill. “To affect change, nurses are often encouraged to become politically active at the grass roots level, and this approach is useful,” she said. “But there is nothing wrong with starting at the top and shooting for the moon. We need to reach out to our legislators at the top levels of government. We also need to be there as elected officials and staffers. We don’t encourage this often enough in nursing education.”

Dr. Connolly fell in love with history from a very early age. “As a child, I was fascinated with stories from the past, particularly people from the past and the ways in which their thoughts and deeds impacted society,” she explained. “I also saw history as a way to travel beyond the boundaries of the small Central Pennsylvania town where I grew up.” Having joined ysn as an Assistant Professor in the Pediatric Specialty in 2003, Dr. Connolly continues to use her love of history to motivate students and colleagues to use people and events of the past as learning models and sources of inspiration. Presently, Dr. Connolly is working with the History of Medicine faculty at the Yale School of Medicine to document the contribution of nursing science to health care delivery. “We need to make sure that there is a nursing ‘presence’ in courses, seminars, and curriculum, so that when faculty and students consider the history of “health care” that they also consider the vital contribution of nursing,” she said. At ysn, Dr. Connolly is teaching a historical praxis research seminar with Professor Helen Varney Burst. She is also a lecturer in the “Issues in Nursing” class where she encourages students “not to assume that the world has to look the way it does, and to think outside the box when it comes to improving health care in this country and in the world.”

“I hope to help them understand that they have more power than they may think, and to mobilize them to use the resources available to them to identify issues and solve problems,” she said. 🏠



Senator Paul Wellstone and Cindy Connolly in the Senate antechamber following the Senator’s speech on the Senate floor on an issue he and Dr. Connolly worked on together