Matron gives modern NHS a check-up

There's something about Matron. Perhaps it is the iconic image of Hattie Jacques from the "Carry On" films. Something powerful, domineering and above all large.

As hospital infections have spiralled in the NHS the call has gone out: "Bring back Matron". So that is what we did. At 83 Hazel Halter has lost none of her authority.

We went to Addenbrookes hospital in Cambridge where Hazel was Matron in the 1970's. Although she doesn't have the physical presence of Hattie Jacques she admits she can still strike the fear of God into hospital staff.

"I think you had to be a bit scary," she said. "I think it is like when you're at home you have to be a little bit frightened of your parents. I think they looked up to you in those days as a figure of authority - but I think they also saw you as a sort of mother figure of the hospital."

Critical eye

Matron has come back to cast a critical eye over the NHS. She will see whether the much vaunted fight back against the super bugs adds up to much.

First stop: the sink.

"Why are you using that particular soap?" Matron asks an unsuspecting nurse.

"It's the one recommended by the Trust for infection control," comes the answer.

"And the other one?"

"That's for general hand washing."

All very different from Matron's time.

"In our day we had a block of carbolic soap and a scrubbing brush. We scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed our nails and our hands until they were almost raw."

Today in hospitals there's a combination of soap and alcohol gel.

"I thought it was confusing" says Hazel.

"I saw several people walk by and not use it. I saw other people using it quite a lot and I don't think people understand when they're supposed to use it and when they're not supposed to use it."

Disapproving of uniforms

It's not the only thing Matron isn't sure about. She thinks visiting hours are too long and she is unhappy about uniforms. Nurses used to have starched collars, aprons and hair pinned up.
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"I don't like the modern uniforms they all seem very tight."
But that is not Hazel's main concern.
"They told me that they took them home to wash," she said. "I'm not happy about that. Some will be very conscientious, others won't be bothering."
When Hazel first trained in 1946 nurses did most of the cleaning.

Cleaning rot
Hospital infections were rare and, of course, MRSA didn't exist - the bug had not developed a resistance to antibiotics by then. Today most cleaning in hospitals is contracted out to private companies. Hazel does not blame individual cleaners, but says when nurses stopped cleaning the rot set in.

"They'd got very slack and I think it's a reflection of society as a whole that people don't pay the same sort of attention to things today like hygiene."
At Addenbrookes - and across the NHS - rates of MRSA and Clostridium Difficile have started to fall. The government has made hygiene a priority. There have been a number of high profile initiatives like deep cleans and the screening of patients. Dr Nick Brown, consultant medical microbiologist at Addenbrookes, says the culture has changed.

"In the not too distant past there was an acceptance that infections were inevitable and there wasn't much that we could do about them."

"I think that attitude has changed and the results recently have shown that that is the case."

In the NHS in England today there are 5,000 so-called modern matrons. They are responsible for a smaller number of wards than the old style matron but they still have control over all nursing and cleaning staff on those wards. So should we bring back the old style Matron? Would it make any difference? Hazel isn't sure.

"I don't think you can bring back Matron in the way it was in my day. But I think personally seeing those girls this morning I thought they were doing a very good job."

The reality is hospitals today are probably too big for one person to look after. The days of Matron have gone.

From BBC News 01.07.08 © BBC MMVIII
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/h/health/7477420.stm

Kindly contributed by Dave Norgate, Bromley Adult Education College. L1.1, L1.3 (reading comprehension, identify main points and detail); Rw/L1.1-1.3 (vocabulary); Ww/L1.1 (spelling); Wt/L1.1-L1.6 (Level 1 writing – Question B only).
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A. Read the article on page 1

Now answer the following questions. Circle the correct answer.

1. Hattie was matron at Addenbrookes in the 1970s.
   True / False

2. In hospitals today more than one type of handwash is used.
   True / False

3. Hazel blames poor cleaning standards on the individual cleaners.
   True / False

4. Dr Nick Brown thinks infections are inevitable.
   True / False

5. Hazel first trained in the 1970s.
   True / False

6. Modern matrons have no control over cleaning staff.
   True / False

B. What are your views? Is the NHS in a mess? Does it need sorting out? Should we bring back matron? Or, do you think that the NHS is fine?

Write an essay giving your views on the current state of the NHS.
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Look at the words in the text that are in **bold**. They are listed on the left below. Can you match them with a word on the right that can replace them in the text.

For example **authority** can be replaced by influence

authority → influence

spiralled → frightening
admits → sloppy
scary → mixture
sort → decline
particular → uncommon
combination → acknowledges
sure → type
concern → worry
rare → escalated
slack → certain
fall → specific
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D. The words in blue are misspelled. Circle the correct spelling.

1. What is the correct spelling of acceptance?
   a. acceptance  b. acceptance  
   c. aceptence  d. acceptanse

2. What is the correct spelling of inevitable?
   a. inevitable  b. inevittable  
   c. inevetable  d. inevytable

3. What is the correct spelling of responsible?
   a. responsssible  b. responseble  
   c. risponsible  d. responsible

4. What is the correct spelling of personelly?
   a. personnelly  b. personaly  
   c. personally  d. personely

5. What is the correct spelling of probarably?
   a. probabley  b. probably  
   c. properbly  d. probebley

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Answers

A.
1. False – her name is Hazel
2. True
3. False
4. False
5. False in 1946
6. False

C.

authority influence
spiralled escalated
admits acknowledges
scary frightening
sort type
particular specific
combination mixture
sure certain
concern worry
rare uncommon
slack slack
combination mixture

D. 1. acceptance
2. inevitable
3. responsible
4. personally
5. probably