

— Men are making it —

In a woman's world

By Patricia J. Houlihan

A NURSE ought to be as near perfection as poor human nature will allow. None but good women and true should enter the ranks of nurses . . . In 1873, when Dr. Pye Henry Chavasse, a British doctor, described the ideal candidate for nursing, he had not anticipated Ed, Brian, Mitch, Kevin and more — nursing candidates all. Although more than 100 years have passed since Dr. Chavasse described these basic prerequisites for the ideal nurse, in Canada in 1985, the nursing profession remains 98 per cent male.

Since the beginning of the women's liberation movement, the media has been full of stories of women who have "made it" in a man's world, all those areas of previous male domination such as law, medicine, engineering, business and the trades. The age of feminism and its underlying premise that every individual should have the right to self-determination have provided women with the moral support they have needed to be pioneers. How-

ever, although this right to self-determination should extend not only to women but also to men, the media have provided us with little or no opportunity to see men successfully selecting traditionally female professions. What are the reasons for this omission? Does the phenomenon not exist or are we afraid to discuss it because of anachronistic stereotypes attached to it?

The phenomenon of men selecting traditionally female professions does indeed exist. Across Canada and here in Nova Scotia, there is at present a small but growing revolution brewing in one of this country's diehard female professions. Men are entering into the one-time convent-like walls of the nursing schools. They are becoming supervisors, head nurses, staff nurses, nursing instructors and, above all, currently swelling the ranks of the student nurse population in a profession where only two per cent of the members are men.

For many years, men in nursing have battled their two most common stereotypes. The first myth about men in nursing is that they are not smart enough to be doctors; the second is that they are not caring enough to be nurses. Adding to the myth is the belief that if they do possess those caring qualities

necessary to be a nurse, one must question their very masculinity.

Up until now, the decision to become a nurse has often not been an easy or clearcut one for a man. Then having become a member of a very small minority within an occupational group, the man in nursing faces both pleasant and unpleasant consequences. Most of the time, it comes as quite a surprise to the patient that the man in the nursing role can be just as caring, competent and professional as a woman without ever losing his sense of who he is as a man.

There is indeed a belief among members of the public that men choose nursing after having been rejected by the more traditionally male-oriented health professions such as medicine, dentistry or pharmacy. In reality, for a man in the nursing profession, nursing is frequently chosen as an alternative to past working environments. Often, a man enters nursing after studying and/or working in one or more distinctly different occupational fields.

Darren Day, 22, will complete nursing school this summer. He began studying to be a nurse after his university graduation. He recalls his decision. "I didn't think about nursing until I was nearly finished

university and I knew I would have to continue my education because of the degree that I had . . . I wanted to do something in health . . . one of my professors suggested nursing."

Kevin Moore, 26, a student nurse nearing the end of his first year, describes his choice of nursing. "I had a number of unsatisfying jobs and always thought of them as dead ends where I couldn't live up to my potential. In the end, the decision to enter nursing school was based on practicality."

The choice to enter nursing seems, then, to have two distinct aspects. There are the obvious practical aspects which include job availability, remuneration, and the opportunity for both vertical and lateral mobility. The other aspect is somewhat less clear, but revolves around the need to give of oneself in a society where many people continuously take without giving.

These young men would rather do something for someone else than have someone do something for them. They, along with their female classmates, seem to have an extra quality that allows them to be more caring people.

After making the decision to enter nursing school, most of the men expected mixed reactions from family and friends. Much to their

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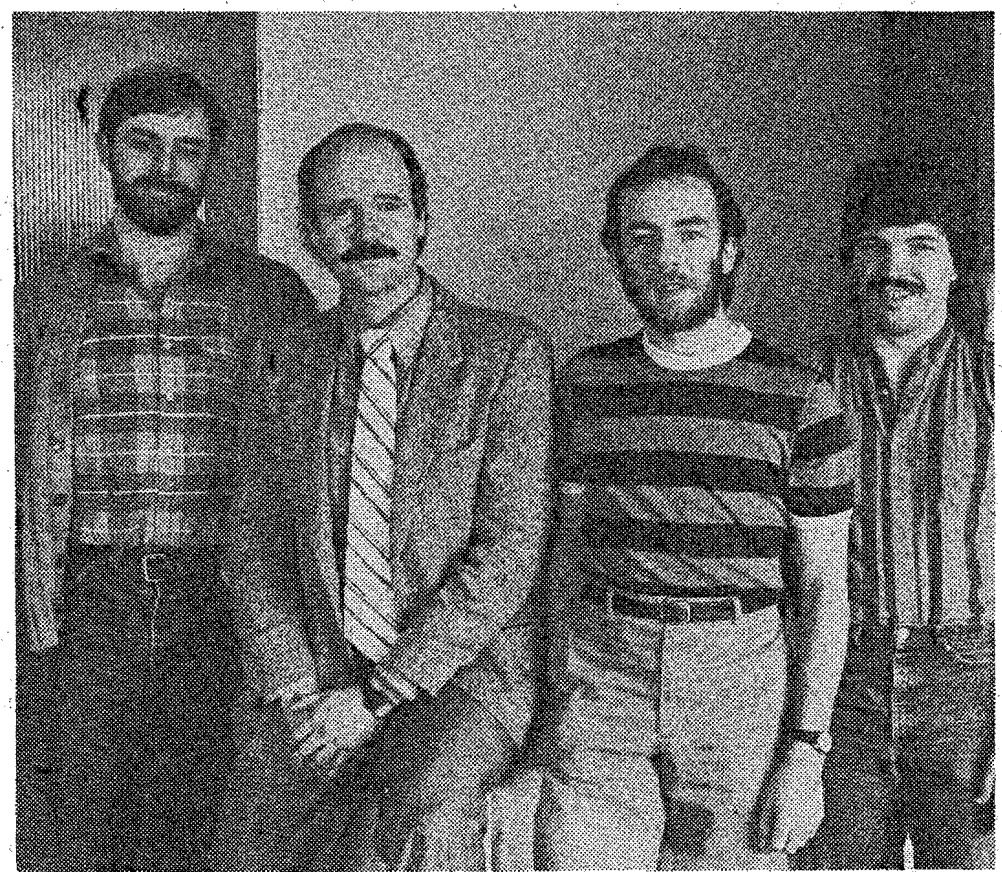
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► Student nurses Darren Bullen, Cyril DuBordieu, David Stainton, Mitch Veinott, Chris St. Peter... A growing revolution.

THE PRO SHOP

relief, the reactions were generally supportive. However, there remains a certain hesitation on the part of many people when faced with the reality of men in nursing. Sometimes the hesitation comes from the man himself.

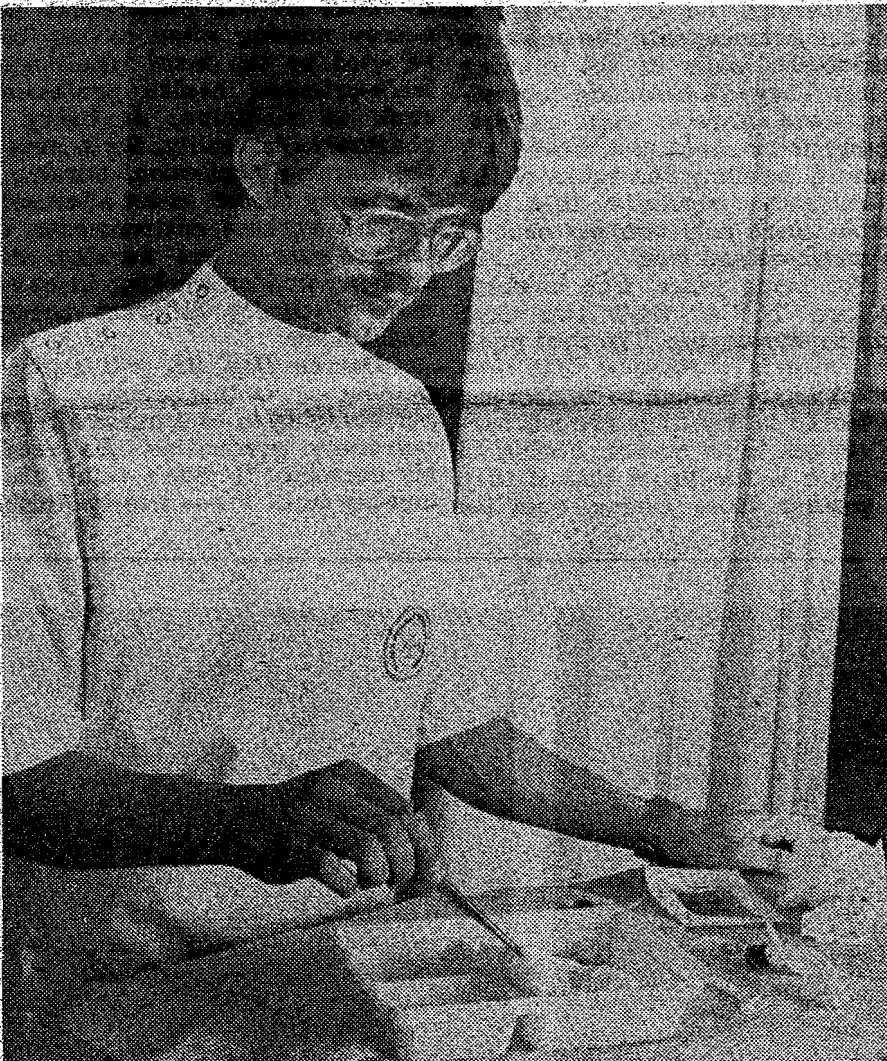
Darren Bullen, 23, a first-year student nurse, describes telling his parents of the decision. "... I didn't tell my parents I was going into nursing until about two weeks before I was to start classes ... I told my mother first and she was glad I was getting into a career with a focus. Even today I don't talk about it much around my father." Darren was fortunate. He had a role model, a young, well-adjusted man who had graduated from nursing school some years before. The young men in nursing school today expect to be role models for the male nurses of the future.

Questionable reactions to male nurses can come from the most unexpected sources. Mitch Veinott, 30, tells the story of an unexpected reaction from an unexpected source. "They send us out to the schools to visit grade two classes. I had a teacher come up to me and she said, 'You're a nursing student aren't you?' I said yes, and she said, 'I wonder if you could come to my class because one of my little boys' father is a nurse and the other kids give him a hard time because they can't see a man as a nurse.'" These children are only seven years old.

After Florence Nightingale opened her first nursing school around 1860, beginning the era of modern nursing education, nursing schools bore an uncanny resemblance to convents. Discipline was the cornerstone of the educational process. Thankfully, much has changed in the nursing schools of 1985. The students arrive at class in anything from skirts and sweaters to sweatsuits and head bands and among them is a smattering of male faces.

The first day of nursing school brought with it a variety of reactions from the men. The realization of being in an obvious minority and the fear of being the only male often causes the male students to gravitate toward one another. Finding other men in the class generally causes a great feeling of relief.

However, as they progress through nursing school, the men find that within the school itself and among the student body, that their minority status has no negative connotations. In fact, they often find themselves in leadership roles. Interestingly, the entire ex-



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Spring Garden Road in Halifax. Some, though, have even made conscious decisions prior to entering nursing school that they would not date classmates.

Would they marry a nurse? "Absolutely." "They're great people." "They care." "Well ... maybe."

The entire nursing profession in Canada today is in a state of dynamic change in the basic educational requirements for the profession. It is anticipated that by the year 2000, a four-year university degree will be the minimum preparation for licensure as a nurse. In addition to this, there is a movement toward recognition of specialization within the profession.

The increase in the numbers will also surely have effects on the profession in the future. An American study published in 1981 indicated that only 35 per cent of women qualifying as registered nurses remain in the profession, whereas 85 per cent of the men remain. In England, where 10 per cent of the nurses are men, they hold 30 per cent of the supervisory positions. All of these factors may come together in the not too distant future to change the complexion of the nursing profession.

Certainly a mixed group within the profession will allow for varying perspectives just as the entrance of women into medicine has done. Many men in nursing today feel that nurses are under-rated, particularly by the media, especially television and the movies. They feel that individuals who say, "Anyone can be a nurse," are totally unaware of the depth and breadth of the requirements to be a nurse — academically, technically and personally.

When questioned about working in a female hierarchy, men in nursing school are quick to point out that "it's a woman's world."

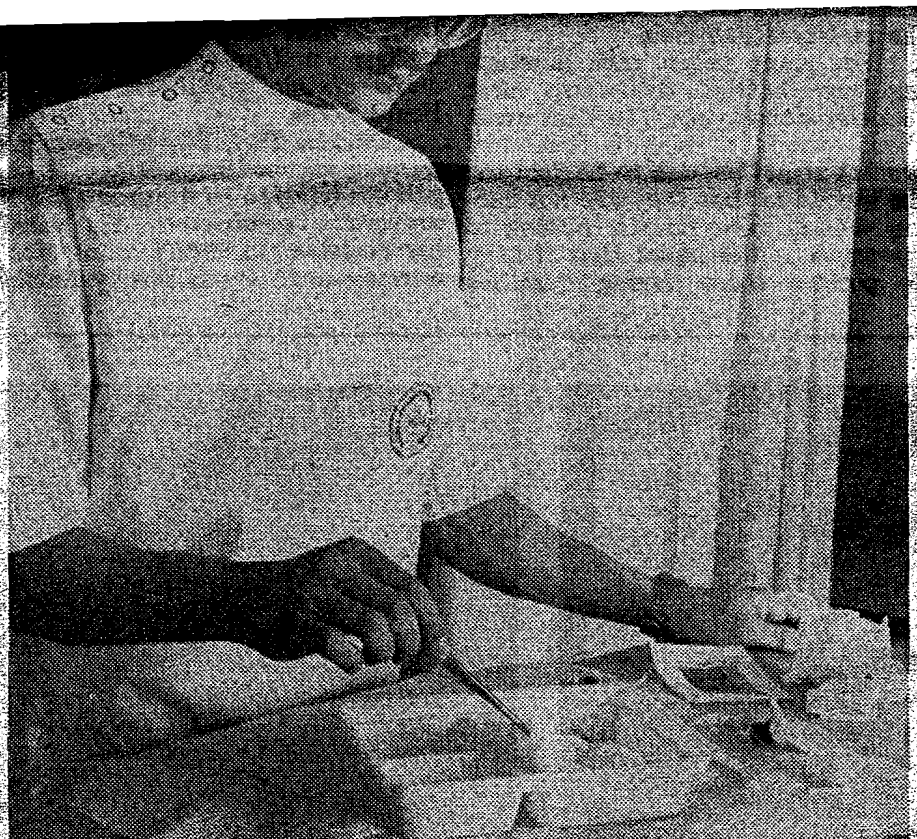
Expansion of medical knowledge and technology have resulted in the need for well-educated, competent health professionals, both male and female, to fill the role of nurse in provision of care to patients in hospitals, occupational settings and in their homes. Although male nursing students believe that the job performed by a man should be the same as that performed by a woman in the nursing role, they recognize that at the present time, the public may not feel the same way. They attribute this to a lack of knowledge on the part of the general public. This lack encompasses both the very existence of male nurses and their level

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Ultimately it is the patient, the consumer of health care services, who determines what type of individual will provide that care. Nurses touch the lives of almost everyone, directly or indirectly, at some time in life and should be well-educated, competent, compassionate and professional. As one of the nursing journals reported a second-grader's reaction to meeting a male nursing student, "A man and a lady are not the same. But there are some jobs that a man and a lady can do that are the same. And a nurse is one of them."



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► Ed Cowan (top), Gerry MacDonald . . . Reactions vary.

experiences. There are so few male nurses around that a man in nursing school today could conceivably complete his entire nursing education without ever having seen a man practise in his chosen profession.

The curriculum is demanding and, as it progresses, it can become physically exhausting. As one student put it, "You couldn't pay me to be a nursing student. I'm here because I want to be."

Do the men in nursing school date their female classmates? For the most part, the answer is no. Most feel that the nature of the educational process in nursing school, which includes a great deal of small group work, precludes dating classmates. This attitude does not, however, obviate the real friendships that develop between the men and the women and one can often find one of the men arm in arm with two of the girls walking down