

Operating Room Attire Through the Years

Submitted by Sandra Johnson

A non nurse friend of mine had an uncle who was the tailor for the Calgary General Hospital. Upon his passing last year in his nineties she acquired some uniforms that he had sewn. Some were obviously very old.

There were OR scrubs, some with long sleeves, fabric and colors not too unlike that which we still wear. There were other uniforms that appeared to be sewn for nursing students. One had a note in the pocket requesting alterations. What I found most interesting was the sizes. A size twelve from years gone by appeared to have about a twenty inch waist. Oh how we have grown! Now clothing manufacturers in general, list sizes as smaller when in fact the measurements of the garment are actually larger.

Moving from Saskatchewan ten years ago, we had worn very interesting attire. It was a new hospital, opened in 1973 and the style of fashion at the time was "Hot Pants." Some sort of tunic or dress (and the fashionable skirt length at the time was above the knee), with a pair of shorts worn underneath. They could be dressy with lace or more casual. So our OR attire consisted of a tunic or short dress in our choice of orange, yellow or bright green(we were supplied with two of each color) and a white short to wear underneath and stockings of course. I'm sure this was related to the fashion trend. We never did find out who was responsible for making us wear such hideous clothes, or no one admitted to it and long after that trend had disappeared we were still wearing these crazy uniforms. To our dismay no one ever stole these outfits as they do now with scrub suits. Eventually we begged for pants to wear instead of the shorts which we wore for a few years until everyone decided to fund their own scrub suits. I'm sure it is possible that this trend will soon be ready for a comeback. And it is very clear to me that if you have worn a fad the first time round you really have no desire to wear it the second time. The only plus I can find from this attire is that if the ward nurses were wearing the short uniforms, we could probably bend over with a little more confidence.

Along with this style came the mindset that we were a little cleaner in the OR than other parts of the hospital. So in order to leave the OR department we had to don a full jumpsuit or coverall and shoe covers. This later was relaxed a bit so that wearing a lab coat over the uniform was an acceptable practice. I believe this practice may still be in place in some centers and in the United States.

I believe that most other hospitals were just wearing a scrub dress with a drawstring waist and the guys would wear scrubs. These dresses were later changed to the unisex scrub suits following concern of perineal fallout.

Everyone loves OR scrubs, like wearing pyjamas. I don't think pyjamas are that hard to acquire, but OR scrubs fly off the shelves and cost hospital budgets thousands of dollars every year to replace them. You really hate it when a surgeon is complaining that there are no scrubs and the only ones he can find are too big or too small. Someone thought they had a great idea to prevent this loss. They ordered scrubs in

unusual colors. They were bright orange with purple, fairly hideous. Only the plan didn't work as they disappeared just as quick if not faster than the normal ones in green. Some hospitals have gone to a dispenser, where scrubs are dispensed like items from a vending machine. This helps to prevent some losses as you also return a soiled uniform to the dispenser and it controlled how many scrubs you were allowed to take.

When I was a student nurse, the OR was a very foreign place to me because we only had two weeks of training there and I was scared to death, thinking that I would do something wrong. I was a bit naive about the restricted and unrestricted areas which were separated by a bench or a line. One side was restricted and the other was unrestricted. At that time you would don your scrubs and reusable shoe covers that had a rubber strip on the bottom which somehow helped in controlling the static electricity before you stepped over the bench or line into the restricted area. This I guess helped prevent potential fires that could result from the combination of the static electricity, high concentrations of oxygen in the presence of flammable anaesthetic gases and I believe that the combinations using ether were some of the most dangerous.

Now that you may be interested in this topic, talk to some of the older nurses that you work with, there are a lot of us, some may have come from other parts of the country, ask them what they wore, you may be amazed.