

Miss Patricia Joan Stephenson

Charles Sturt University is conferring this Honorary Degree on Patricia Stephenson in recognition of her distinguished career in the nursing profession and for her significant contribution to the development of nursing education in the Riverina region and within New South Wales.

Miss Stephenson completed her general nursing training at Albury Base Hospital in 1954 and her midwifery training at the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington in Sydney in 1956. She then worked at West Wyalong Hospital as a Senior Sister before journeying to Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe in 1957. While overseas, Miss Stephenson worked in the speciality area of Obstetrics at the Grace Hospital in Vancouver, Canada and at St Stephen's Hospital in Fulharn, England. On returning to Australia and to her home town of West Wyalong in the early 1960s, Miss Stephenson resumed her position as Senior Sister at the West Wyalong Hospital. She subsequently became the Hospital's Matron.

In 1969, Miss Stephenson was awarded a scholarship from the New South Wales Health Commission to undertake full-time studies for the Diploma of Nursing Administration course at the New South Wales College of Nursing. In 1970, after completing her course, she was appointed to the position of Deputy Matron at Tamworth Base Hospital and in 1973 she took up the position of Matron at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital - a position in which she remained for the next 19 years.

Patricia Stephenson's appointment to the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital co-incided with the move in New South Wales to introduce more intensive and specialist nursing education in response to the mounting dissatisfaction with existing hospital-based nurse education programs. Not long after her arrival, Miss Stephenson introduced an innovative system of team nursing whereby groups of two, three or four student nurses worked under the supervision of a team leader. Miss Stephenson ensured that these teams of student nurses at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital gained comprehensive experience in all spheres of nursing including medical, surgical, paediatric, acute care, obstetric, operating theatre, accident and emergency, psychiatric and district nursing.

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In 1974, the New South Wales Nurses Education Board - the Board for which Miss Stephenson was to assume responsibility as Chairperson during the 1980s - recommended a complete overhaul of the system of nurse education in the State. It recommended that Colleges of Advanced Education should be encouraged to offer diploma courses in nursing as the preparatory program for practice as a Registered Nurse. Armed with her philosophy that "when presented with opportunities, they should be taken", Miss Stephenson gave strong endorsement to this recommendation and, along with Dr Cliff Blake, then Principal of the Riverina College of Advanced Education, she was instrumental in having a pilot program of nursing education commence at the College in 1975- the first such pilot program for a rural College of Advanced Education. She participated actively in the Curriculum Development Committee for the pilot program and helped design the curriculum for what became the Diploma of Applied Science (Nursing) course. The nursing program pioneered at the Riverina College of Advanced Education quickly became a nationally recognised course and eventually heralded the demise of hospital-based nursing education programs.

Miss Stephenson's involvement in, and vigorous defence of, the pilot program at the Riverina College of Advanced Education quickly established her reputation as an innovative, progressive and forthright leader in nursing education. This reputation was recognised both State-wide and nationally. Her expertise was garnered during her membership of the New South Wales Health Commission's Nursing Consultative Committee between 1975 and 1978 and as a member, then Chairperson, of the New South Wales Nurses Education Board between 1980 and 1988. It was under her leadership of the New South Wales Nurses Education Board that the transition of nurse education from hospital-based training into the higher education sector was successfully completed. Indeed, during the early stages of this transition, Miss Stephenson personally conducted workshops and seminars throughout New South Wales to defend the decision to transfer basic nurse education into the higher education sector and to assist health regions to prepare for the transfer.

Despite the commitments associated with being Chairperson of the Nurses Education Board, Miss Stephenson continued in her role as Director of Nursing at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital and maintained close involvement with the nursing program at the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education. As a member of the Board of Nursing Studies at the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education, she contributed significantly to the development of the Diploma of Health Science (Nursing) course, the Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing) course for Registered Nurses and the external Midwifery program. She was also a member of the Clinical Practicum Committee during this time. As a member of this Committee, Miss Stephenson was able to demonstrate that nursing students from the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education, undertaking their clinical placements at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital and within the District Health Service, would have exposure to a number of innovative nursing and administrative practices which she pioneered. These included the introduction of a patient assessment information system, the establishment of a parenting centre, the appointment of domiciliary midwifery caters for the early discharge of obstetric patients, the appointment of a nurse continence adviser, establishment of a clinical nurse consultant position for first line emergency care courses, seconding a senior nurse to work in the Nursing Research Unit at the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education and her active promotion and sponsorship of professional nursing activities associated with the Riverina Nursing Inservice Education Committee.

With the foundation of Charles Sturt University, Miss Stephenson continued her close association with the nursing programs offered by the University. She accepted membership of the School of Nursing Advisory Committee within the newly established Faculty of Health Studies and became a member of the external review committee for the accreditation of the School's external Midwifery program.

Besides her unyielding commitment to, and leadership in, the field of nursing education, Patricia Stephenson has had a continuing and significant involvement in the development of higher education in south western New South Wales. Between 1979 and 1990, she was a member of Council of the Riverina College of Advanced Education and the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education. Following the establishment of Charles Sturt University, she became a member of the Riverina Campus Advisory Council - a position she continues to hold.

Miss Patricia Stephenson, a Fellow of the New South Wales College of Nursing and a Fellow of the Institute of Nursing Administrators, has had a distinguished record of public service and is a most worthy recipient of this Honorary Degree from Charles Sturt University.