

MARY DUNNING, DSc

Mr Chancellor,

Mary Dunning is a nurse. She is also an Emeritus professor, and until recent retirement, Deputy Dean of Health, Community & Education Studies at Northumbria University. She has played a central role in higher education for over three decades, but the key to her identity, her achievements and her place in this celebration is the simple word “nurse”. Like many of us, Mary takes a keen interest in her appearance but there can be no designer outfit which comes close to engendering the excitement she felt when, at 16, she left Sutton Coalfield High School for Girls and entered Good Hope Hospital wearing her nurse cadet outfit. It was another age: nursing was a craft with a rigid hierarchy and she was a lowly being who should be seen and not heard. Though I lack eye-witness reports, I suspect Mary would have accepted such constraints with reservation. Mary then enrolled at UCH in London where her talents flowered. She won the Bonham Carter award in 1968 as the outstanding nurse in

her year and began her professional journey. Ann's husband David, her partner for 32 years, remembers their invitation to an annual gathering at the Sister's Residence, otherwise known as Menopause Mansion, where the Director of Nursing could assess the suitability of partners. How the world has changed! She earned her sister/tutor diploma and became a lecturer at Barts. In 1982 she was awarded a Masters degree in Curriculum Studies and was then appointed Assistant Director of the Newcastle School of Nursing.

Each major hospital undertook its own nurse training programme. Some lament the passing of those days but nostalgia can blind us to the transformation of women's role and expectations in our society. Our childhood world regarded a woman's career as supplementary to her primary task of finding a husband. Some sections of society encouraged girls towards higher education but in the main there were few outlets for able young women. In fact, there were three: secretary, teacher and nurse. The consequence was that nursing schools could count

on a steady flow of gifted young women willing to put up with a challenging role for little financial reward.

The explosion of higher education, coupled with our social revolution, changed everything. Women realised what men had been keeping secret for several thousand years; with one or two obvious exceptions, there was nothing a man could do that a women couldn't do at least as well. Nursing had a problem. It began to look old fashioned. To make matters worse, the job was becoming more intellectually demanding. I remember, for example, the retirement of the old sister in the special care baby unit in 1979 allowed us to teach the nurses to analyse blood gases from ventilated babies on the ward at night.

In the face of these major demographic and technical changes, a revolution was needed in nurse education. Mary Dunning was our Che Guevara. To give nurses an equal but distinct status needed a change of attitude across health care, society and most of all a change in the expectation of nurses themselves.

The first phase was the progressive consolidation of nursing schools. Newcastle merged with Northumbria and then with the Bede School to form BNN, the Bede, Newcastle and Northumbria College of Nursing Studies. The NHS decided that training nurses was not core activity. The University of Northumbria won the contract and in 1995 Mary became Deputy Dean of the new Health Faculty with primary responsibility for nurse education. Subsequent years have seen sustained growth and development; twenty two premises have become a single well-equipped campus where 7,500 young people now study. The continued success of our hospital rests in no small part on Mary's achievements.

That Mary has risen to a position of leadership regionally and nationally through this period of intense change is clear testament to her abilities. Throughout she has led from the front; "larger than life" and "colourful" are words used to describe her style. One memorable feature is that the

combination of a quick mind and the confidence to speak it has meant that, at times, output runs ahead of quality control resulting in an entertaining line in neologisms and mixed metaphors; one which appealed to me as an amateur percussionist was “blowing your own drum”. Time does not permit further examples but it’s clear Mary has left a lasting impression on those who learned under her leadership. More significant is her successful leadership of the rebirth of nurse education.

Mr Chancellor, I invite you to grant Mary Dunning, a nurse, the degree of Doctor of Science honoris causa.

Citation by Professor John Burn