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Opposition has stumbled upon itself on nurse training issue

In its rush to try to score political points, the GSD Opposition has once again stumbled upon itself in trying to take credit out of the Government's massive step forward in providing local training for nurses.

The fact is that the GSD did nothing to allow nursing assistants to go on a 'learning pathway' to Registered Nurse. In fact, it was during the GSD's time that enrolled nurse training was abolished and career progression from Nursing Assistant to Registered Nurse became impossible. The NVQ level 2 which they brought in did not allow progression to enrolled nurse, a grade no longer recognised, let alone Staff Nurse. It made the diploma (now degree) course in Nursing the only avenue for achieving Registered Nurse status, blocking the less academically minded from being able to progress their career and at the same time in effect capping the number of staff nurses Gibraltar could generate.

This followed changes in the UK, but in effect the GSD failed to respond to changes in nurse education in UK, lacked the commitment to the workforce and to the young and typically also lacked the vision to adapt nurse training locally to serve the needs of our own Community. It did not take the GSLP/Liberal Government long to be able to make the necessary arrangements to re-establish the possibility of attaining the enrolled nurse grade in Gibraltar, and at the same time ensure a real pathway to Registered Nurse was once again opened. This, with all the criteria for training set by Kingston and St George's University being met.

The GSD is incorrect, and misleading, in saying that Kingston and St George's University "runs" the School of Health Studies. The School is run by the Gibraltar Health Authority. The Gibraltar Health Authority has an agreement with the University, and new ways of co-operating are currently being explored. The Government greatly values its links with the University and in fact the Minister for Health, Dr John Cortes visited the St George's campus last November, when he met with the Dean, the Head of the School of Nursing, and other officials, as well as with Gibraltarian students on site.

Mrs Ellul-Hammond once again shows her lack of knowledge and experience of healthcare. In the GSD press release she asks how the enrolled nursing grade will be “reinstated in the GHA’s Nursing Services Directorate in relation to job description and pay structure”. This is an incredible statement coming from someone with the health portfolio for the Opposition and who was a member of the GHA Board between 2007 and 2011. As Mrs Ellul-Hammond should have known, there already is an enrolled nurse grade, and a payscale, held by the 56 or nurses who held the grade prior to the GSD’s changes, and still do so. They were in effect in danger of extinction as they were not being replaced and would have disappeared by natural wastage.

Mrs Ellul-Hammond also asks for assurances that “nursing standards and conditions of service in Gibraltar will not be compromised”. It is hard to determine whether the GSD’s health spokesman knows what she is talking about. Clearly, as the Government’s initiative will increase training and increase the number of junior nurses trained, nursing standards will improve, while conditions of service will not be affected.

The GSD further seems to be claiming to have set up nurse training in Gibraltar. This is not only false, but is also an insult to all the many professionals who have dedicated their careers through the decades to developing and training nurses. The setting up of nurse training in fact has its roots in 1944, through the work of Miss Jane Reilly as Matron of the Colonial Hospital. The first locally trained State Enrolled Assistant Nurses were Mary Brooks and Margaret Bear in 1948, and the Nurse Registration Ordinance facilitating the setting up of nurse training dates to 1949. The School of Nursing in fact had its first permanent home in John Mackintosh Wing of the old St Bernard’s Hospital in 1969. What happened during the GSD’s time was the change of name from School of Nursing to School of Health Studies when Keith Azopardi was Minister for Health in 1998. The Diploma in Nursing started in 2000 because of changes in the UK, and was not a GSD initiative. In fact it was during the GSLP administration in 1989-90 that the first links with a UK institution, Sheffield and North Trent College, which was later integrated into the University of Sheffield, were achieved. The first intake into the BSc (Hons) Degree in Adult Nursing was in fact in 2012, again due to changes in the UK.

For the Opposition to claim that they practically innovated professional nurse training in Gibraltar is both arrogant and untrue, and a typical attempt to change the perception of history by what has become an increasingly frustrated political party.

But the most presumptuous and insulting comment by Mrs Ellul Hammond is contained in the claim that “thanks to the GSD nurses have the tools necessary not only to be proficient in their practice..., but also have the means to develop as nurse managers”. This comment really takes the prize. This suggestion that prior to the times of the GSD nurses could not be “proficient in their practice” is preposterous, and questions the proficiency of the hundreds of Gibraltar trained nurses who came before. It also calls into question the development of nurse managers, as if they had not existed before 1996, or as if those that did were not properly trained.

“Achieving the status of nurse manager - and we have excellent ones at the moment - is through the hard work, training and commitment of our senior nurses, and nobody else, certainly not the GSD,” said Dr John Cortes, Minister for Health. He added “In a year, we have opened a hugely important door to our junior nurses and to young people who want to pursue a career in nursing. And we have more still to do.

“I am glad that the GSD has welcomed this - although they had ample opportunity to do it in their time and did not. But their trying to take the credit for the work of nursing professionals through the decades is simply not acceptable. It surely affects the Opposition’s ever diminishing credibility.”