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“Absconded”, “Useless” and “Most Unsatisfactory”: Trainee Nurse Attrition in North Queensland C. 1950s To 1970s

Overview of topic: This presentation examines patterns of nursing attrition between the 1950s and 1970s at the Townsville General Hospital (TGH), the largest healthcare facility in Northern Australia during the period. While TGH enrolled and educated scores of nurse trainees annually, over half of the trainees failed to complete.

Methods: This study employed traditional historical research methods, drawing on several primary and secondary sources. The TGH trainee nurse register was subjected to internal and external criticism before being transcribed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for demographic mapping and content analysis of attrition causes. Secondary sources, including historical accounts of TGH, provided essential context for understanding patterns of attrition.

Findings and implications: The analysis revealed TGH trainee nurses abandoned their nursing training for various reasons including prioritising social expectations of the time (e.g., marriage), underperformance, resistance against hierarchical structures, and a general disillusionment with nursing. However, distinct regional patterns also emerged, with some trainees leaving the profession due to being recalled to remote properties and Aboriginal communities to assist with caregiving duties. These findings offer new insights into the working conditions and sociocultural influences that shaped nursing education in North Queensland nurse training during the mid-to-late twentieth century.