

# Hospital Corners

Category: Stories

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**Eileen Valinoti**

“And now, as we finish up, we’ll need to put our blankets away. I want you to fold them like this,” announced my yoga teacher—a bit sternly, I thought. With swift, deft hands, she began to demonstrate. Something in the tone of her voice and the sharp jut of her chin brought me back to Miss Coyle..

Miss Mary Coyle RN was the nursing arts instructor in my first year of training, more than fifty years ago. She taught our group of thirty–twenty–seven eager eighteen-year-old women and three young nuns—the basic nursing skills: how to give a bed bath; administer an injection; prepare hot and cold compresses, etc.

Twice a week, my classmates and I filed into her classroom, which was set up to resemble a sickroom. Its features included basins, bandage trays, a large bath thermometer and a hospital bed, on which reclined a lifelike mannequin whom we called “Mrs. Chase.”

One morning Miss Coyle announced that we were to learn how to make the hospital bed.

Some of us yawned and shifted in our seats.

Miss Coyle frowned. “A badly made bed is uncomfortable to lie in, and a wrinkled bottom sheet can lead to pressure sores.”

Now we sat up straight. No one wanted to be responsible for pressure sores, although we weren’t sure what they were. Miss Coyle did not elaborate.

Chastened, we left our seats and stood as directed in a circle about the bed. After carefully moving Mrs. Chase to a chair and stripping the bed, Miss Coyle began to demonstrate.

First, she placed a large rubber sheet on the mattress, then covered it with a crisp white sheet.

“Now you anchor the bottom sheet by making the hospital corner,” she said, “lifting the sheet about eighteen inches from the side of the bed and folding it at a right angle, then tucking it in.”

Miss Coyle worked briskly, creating the perfect hospital corner in one elegant maneuver as I struggled to match her words to her nimble movements.

When she’d finished, the bed looked perfect. Only the boldest patient, I thought, would dare to disturb it.

Now each of us would demonstrate our technique.

"Miss Murphy," Miss Coyle said, directing me to the bed.

My heart pounded furiously. The image of the "hospital corner" vanished from my head.

As I fumbled helplessly, the rubber sheet slipped and slid, and the crisp white sheets grew damp and wrinkled in my perspiring hands. In the end, all I could manage was to bunch the bottom sheet into clumsy little clumps beneath the mattress, just as I'd always done, and my mother before me.

At last, Miss Coyle put a restraining hand on my shoulder and addressed the class. "Manual dexterity," she said, with a puckered smile, "is an essential requirement for a nurse."

With a rush of shame, I put my hands behind my back; they felt enormous and useless. I looked at Miss Coyle's small, sturdy ones—capable, no doubt, of wonders.

After class I brooded over the phrase "manual dexterity." Could one acquire it, or was it an inborn trait? My father hated tools of every description—and they hated him. An encounter with a hammer and nails invariably resulted in a smashed finger and howls of pain. For my mother, the greatest challenge was to sew on a button. Growing up, I'd learned to make do with safety pins.

Every evening after that class, I would practice my bedmaking in the nursing arts classroom. Often I stood perplexed, studying the length of sheet in my hand—was it the requisite eighteen inches? Alone in the room except for Mrs. Chase, I despaired of ever making a proper bed.

One afternoon as twilight fell in the gloomy room, a classmate, Sister Catherine, stopped in to retrieve a book. She stared at me in astonishment: Not even the nuns spent their spare time in the nursing arts classroom.

Without a word, she placed her hands over mine and began to guide them. We worked together in slow, easeful motions. The weight of Sister's warm flesh and her calm, soothing presence steadied my nerves. As she murmured words of encouragement, I finally made a satisfactory bed on my own, complete with all the right angles.

Sister waved away my thanks.

"I'm late for prayers," she said, hurrying out the door.

I rushed out after her, happy to leave my perfect bed to the impenetrable gaze of Mrs. Chase...

Now, listening to my yoga teacher's stern instructions, I felt my stomach muscles tighten. No matter that in my nursing career I had made thousands of beds with great success, had folded countless sheets, blankets, pillowcases and linens and had never gotten a complaint.

I found myself looking anxiously out of the corner of my eye at my classmates to see how they were following the teacher's directions. *Did she say to fold*

*the blanket in thirds, or was it fourths?* I wondered anxiously.

Then I saw that everyone was laughing and chattering and happily folding their blankets every which way. My stomach relaxed.

The teacher had ended the class by covering each of us with a blanket as we lay stretched out on our mats—a gesture, I’d supposed, in the spirit of Buddhist compassion. Compassion, I had thought, half dozing beneath my blanket, lies at the heart of nursing, manifesting itself in the many small acts in a nurse’s day—holding a patient’s hand during a painful bone-marrow aspiration, murmuring “I’m here” into the ear of a dying patient, brushing the tangles from an Alzheimers’ patient’s white hair before her daughter comes to visit.

Making a hospital bed, giving an injection and starting an IV are all vital tasks that can be taught in a classroom like Miss Coyle’s, but performing these tasks with compassion makes all the difference.

Looking back, I’m proud that I learned the essential skills of nursing, that I overcame my insecurity and mastered the hospital corner. But my greatest gift to my patients, and my greatest joy, was when I performed these skills with compassion—and in those moments became the nurse I’d always wanted to be.

**About the author:**

Eileen Valinoti is a retired registered nurse who has enjoyed a lifelong interest in writing. Her work has appeared in popular magazines as well as in [\*The Yale Journal of Medicine and the Humanities\*](#), [\*Nursing\*](#), [\*The Healing Muse\*](#), [\*ARS Medica\*](#) and the nursing anthology [\*Meditations on Hope\*](#).

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