

Dr. Hildegard Peplau
1909-1999

“Mother of Psychiatric Nursing” and “Nurse of the Century”



Hildegard Peplau was a faculty member of the School of Nursing at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. She is the only person to serve the American Nurses Association (ANA) as Executive Director and later as President. She became the first published nursing theorist since Florence Nightingale.

Peplau was well-known for her *Theory of Interpersonal Relations*, which helped to revolutionize the scholarly work of nurses. Her achievements are valued by nurses all over the world and she became known to many as the “*Mother of Psychiatric Nursing*” and the “*Nurse of the Century*.”

In 1931, she graduated from Pottstown, Pennsylvania School of Nursing. Peplau earned a Bachelor’s degree in interpersonal psychology in 1943 at Bennington College in Vermont. She studied psychological issues together with Erich Fromm, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and Harry Stack Sullivan at Chestnut Lodge, a private psychiatric hospital in Maryland. Peplau received her master’s and doctoral degrees from Teachers College, Columbia University in 1947.

In 1954 she commenced her work at Rutgers University School of Nursing. At the time, nurses were not considered “specialists” of any kind. After receiving a National Institute of Health grant, she developed the first accredited Masters of Arts program for psychiatric nursing in United States . The curriculum for clinical nurse specialists was a precursor for nurse practitioner education. She taught her students at Greystone Park, Overbrook, and Marlboro psychiatric hospitals in NJ. Students met with their patients twice/week to interview them individually and also oversaw group therapy. The production of the film entitled *The Nurse-Patient Relationship* (1958), based on Peplau’s work at Greystone Park State Hospital, was used as a teaching tool for physicians and nurses around the world. It was nominated for an academy award in the documentary category In a hard-won battle, in 1967 the New Jersey State Community Mental Health Advisory Council Board approved a resolution that permitted clinical nurse specialists to work in community health centers as professional therapists for the first time. This historic event marked a turning point for nursing education and practice. In 1948 Peplau held her first expert advisory position at the World Health Organization.

Watch Dr. Shirley Smoyak’s interview on greystoneoralhistory.com under the Doe v. Klein category. Dr. Smoyak trained under Dr. Peplau at Greystone in the 1950’s and later served as the Chairman of the Doe v. Klein state mandated monitoring committee for Greystone Hospital.