

## Learning Curves

*By Mary Jane McCormick*

I can still hear Sister Marta singing, "Every little movement has a meaning of its own," as we opened our books and began learning about the human digestive system. And at the beginning of our surgical rotation, she belted out, "I've got you under my skin."

To say the training to become a nurse was an adventure would truly be an understatement. The book knowledge alone was overwhelming, but the practical application on real patients, instead of manikins, was nothing short of terrifying.

I remember my first intramuscular injection, a fancy name for a giving a shot. With my mentor at my side I explained the procedure to my patient, had no trouble identifying the exact muscle site, cleansed the skin using proper technique, held the needle at the correct angle, and injected my patient with minimal discomfort.

All was going well in spite of my shaky hands, until my instructor began yelling in a whisper, "Aspirate, Aspirate! I pulled the needle out without giving the pain medication and began checking to see if my patient was choking or worse yet, not breathing. Welcome to the world of nursing and the English language when words have several meanings. Webster states, "To aspirate means to inhale a fluid or foreign body into the lungs." But in this scenario, it means to pull back on the plunger of the syringe to make sure you are not in a blood vessel.

Even as a nurse's aide, I was committed to giving my patients the best of care. This was in the days of steel bedpans, yes, the time before plastic! Mrs. Jones asked for help, and in my fervor I warmed up this cold, heavy pan with hot water. Yes, you guessed it ... I can still hear Mrs. Jones hollering as I almost burned her backside.

And so my nursing career was off and running. I was sincere in my promise to "do no harm." But the very nature of my training included 'trial and error.' As I moved through medical surgical, pediatrics, surgery, psychiatry, geriatrics, home-health and hospice care, my training wheels stayed on. Each specialty required more book learning and application with real people.

I breathe sighs of relief when I reflect on some 50 years of nursing and can say to the best of my knowledge: all my patients survived my learning curve.