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HEALTH

Loretta Ford, Who Helped Create the Role of Nurse Practitioner, Dies at 104

She was convinced that nurses could go well beyond their traditional role. Many doctors disagreed.

By [James R. Hagerty](#) [Follow](#)

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Loretta C. Ford, right, in 1974. PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

When there is no doctor around, a nurse should be able to step in, prescribing medicine for a sore throat or advising a terrified parent at 3 a.m. Such was the conviction of Loretta Ford as a young nurse in rural Colorado in the 1950s.

She believed nurses could go far beyond hand-holding, wound-wrapping and temperature-taking. Nurses weren't pretending to be physicians, she said in a 2016 speech, but wanted

“to get away from being a handmaiden” to them.

The problem was that physicians regarded themselves as the “lords of health,” as she put it. They were, and remain, determined to defend their turf.

So Ford, who died Jan. 22 at the age of 104, charted a stealth approach. Rather than confronting or challenging physicians, she teamed up with one of them, Henry K. Silver, a pediatrician. Together, they designed a curriculum for registered nurses to go on for further education and qualify for a new profession: nurse practitioner. The first students enrolled in that program in 1965 at the University of Colorado.

Rather than seeking approval from boards of medicine, she said, “We went to tell them what we were doing.”

Today, nurse-practitioner services are available across the country and overseas. About 385,000 nurse practitioners are working in the U.S., more than triple the total two decades ago. The aging of baby boomers is likely to create more demand for their services. (Physician assistants are a separate professional category, with different training, but perform many of the same functions.)

Nurse practitioners order and interpret medical tests, initiate and manage treatments, and prescribe medications. They can refer patients to specialist doctors and, depending on their training and state regulations, perform certain routine medical procedures, such as inserting tubes to drain fluid from lungs. In many states, they can operate their own practices, independent of physicians.



Ford in a 1972 speech at the University of Rochester School of Nursing called for 'a new order for nursing's direction in education, research, and practice.' PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

In the early days, Ford met resistance not just from physicians but from nursing professors wary of what seemed like radical change. Some colleagues stopped talking to her. "I've been kissed and kicked and reviled and revered and crucified and credited," Ford often quipped.

Baby steps

Loretta Cecelia Pfungstel, known as Lee, was born on Dec. 28, 1920, in New York City's Bronx borough and grew up in Haskell, N.J. Her father, Joseph Pfungstel, an Austrian immigrant, was a lithographer. Her mother, Nellie (Williams) Pfungstel, oversaw the household. Young Loretta dreamed of becoming a teacher but couldn't afford college.

At age 16, she began working as a nurse aide at a hospital in New Brunswick, N.J. Nurses, she noticed, sometimes delivered babies. "Of course we were supposed to have a doctor in attendance but we didn't always," she said in a 1993 interview with Public Health Nursing.

During World War II, she enlisted in the Army Air Forces (predecessor of the Air Force) and served at base hospitals in the U.S. The GI Bill helped her pay for further education after the war at the University of Colorado, where she studied nursing, public health and education, ultimately receiving a doctorate. Ford also served as the director of nursing for the Boulder

County, Colo., health department.

As a public-health nurse, “I was a lone ranger,” she told students at the University at Buffalo nursing school in 2016. “Whatever went on in health, I was called. I took care of it.” Her responsibilities included epidemiology, collecting vital statistics and setting up baby clinics in rural areas with few or no doctors.

She later served as a nursing professor at the University of Colorado. In 1972, the University of Rochester recruited her as dean of its nursing school.

Ford signed a steel beam at a groundbreaking event for the new Loretta C. Ford Education Wing at the University of Rochester School of Nursing in 2005. PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

21-gun salute

For her work expanding the role of nurses, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame and honored with a Surgeon General's Medallion. At her 104th birthday party in December, near her home in Wildwood, Fla., a veterans group gave her a 21-gun salute. Ford wore a red silk jacket and cheerfully intervened when accolades from visiting

admirers dragged on. “Just knock it off,” she said.

Ford is survived by her daughter, Valerie Monrad. Her husband, William J. Ford, died in 2014.

The American Medical Association, which represents physicians, now acknowledges nurse practitioners as “essential and valuable members of physician-led healthcare teams” but continues to resist what it sees as encroachment by them. The AMA website says physicians have far more training and education than nurse practitioners.

Ford saw no need for physicians to fret. “There’s enough work to go around for everybody,” she told Modern Healthcare in 1995. “The patient needs team care.” Late in life, her caregivers called her Dr. Lee.

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