

“Medical Recovery and Religious Redemption:
Catholic Nuns and Hospitals, 1865-1925”

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This paper examines the late nineteenth and early twentieth century hospital activities of three orders of Catholic sisters using case examples from several different hospitals in the western and midwestern United States. It shows the interaction between women’s religious roles and broader economic roles of creating viable health care institutions by exploring how boundaries and norms about health care are created in a market-oriented society. When immigrant nuns came to the United States in the late nineteenth century, they encountered a market economy that structured the way they developed their hospitals. Sisters enthusiastically engaged in this market, but they used a set of tools and understandings that were counter to the market. Their entrepreneurship was not to expand profits and market share but rather to advance Catholic spirituality.

To understand what nuns were doing, we have to discard the notion of hospitals as inevitably and uniquely medical. I address the reality that Catholic sisters’ hospitals were both medical and religious institutions. By recognizing this broader definition of hospitals, we are invited to shift our conceptions of health and disease. Indeed, the roles that Catholic sisters played in the hospital marketplace require a rethinking of the very meaning of health care.

The study is interdisciplinary in that it falls within the realm of the history of medicine, women, religion, business, and urban studies. The chief investigator’s background as a trained historian and nurse will enrich historical perspective. The paper relies on the methods of social and cultural history and has involved seeking and evaluating evidence in primary sources that are located in the sisters’ archives, many of which have not been made public before.

Today, Catholic hospitals are the largest single group of the nation’s not-for-profit hospitals, thus warranting a voice in the ongoing debate over health care in a market-oriented society. Acknowledging, from the view of history, that the hospital has only recently become a uniquely medical institution invites study of why and how people are establishing hospitals. This study will enhance theoretical understandings of the links between religion, gender, immigration, medicine, and economics that have been invisible in much of modern scholarship.