

The Cardiff Lecture 2005

'Nursing Ambitions: Protecting the basic principles of nursing against the challenges of constant change'

Linda Thomas OBE
Editor in Chief,
Royal College of Nursing Publishing

Jointly hosted by
Health Communication Research Centre &
Centre for Language & Communication Research Centre,
Cardiff School of English, Communication & Philosophy
Cardiff University

For citation purposes, please use HCRC, Cardiff University

Nursing Ambitions: Protecting the basic principles of nursing against the challenges of constant change.

Nursing has been of profound importance in my life. My mother was a nurse, I became a nurse myself and married a nurse – whose mother was a nurse. One of my brothers went into nursing and both my brothers married nurses. You might say it's a family business and as such it is not, perhaps, that unusual. We all ended up working in very different kinds of nursing, in the NHS and in the independent sector, in England and in Wales, in areas ranging from mental health to casualty, from health visiting and midwifery to the care of older people. None of us, I think, conform to any of the popular stereotypes of nursing with which one would be familiar: the battleaxe matrons and naughty nurses so beloved of the Carry On films, or those ministering angels who continue to flourish as the heroines of Mills & Boon medical romances.

So the nurses in my family may not conform to any stereotypical images but I do believe there are basic principles of nursing that connect our diverse experiences. I do believe that nurses continue to protect those basic principles despite the constantly changing environments in which they work. Not everyone agrees. According to some media pundits, changes in nurse education mean that nurses are now 'too posh to wash' and 'too clever to care'. Certainly, the education and training I and my contemporaries underwent in the 1970s is as different from the programme nursing students follow today as it was from the war-time training of the previous generation. This is as it should be if the profession is to keep pace with phenomenal changes in the health care environment.

It does not mean that in developing its educational programmes, nursing has abandoned its fundamental caring principles. Without a doubt, better educated nurses are equipped to provide better care for patients, of course they are, and this is by no means a new take on nursing.

The Lady of the Lamp herself, Florence Nightingale, expressed a similar view in 1866 on the subject of nursing education: 'My principle has always been that we should give the best training we could to any women of any class, of any sect, paid or unpaid, who had the requisite qualifications; moral, intellectual and physical for the vocation of Nurse'. (Baly1991). Some might quibble with that word vocation nowadays – and I'll be touching on it again later – but we would certainly applaud Nightingale's spirited rebuttal of a view that no lady should work for pay and that pay should not be a consideration for nurses.

Miss Nightingale was a contemporary of Mary Seacole, born in 1805 in Jamaica of a Jamaican mother and Scottish army officer father. As we celebrate the bicentenary of her birth this year, Mrs Seacole's healing work is once again being given the recognition it received during her own lifetime. A marvellous new book by Jane Robinson paints a vivid picture of an extraordinary life (Robinson 2005) and is an excellent adjunct to her autobiography, 'The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands' (Seacole 1857, new edition 2004).

Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale were in The Crimea at the same time but as Jane Robinson (2005) notes: 'While Florence may have been worshipped for her wan-faced, angelic ministrations on the wards of Scutari, Mary was clapped on the back for her generous and impulsive readiness to help anyone (in uniform) she could – even if that did mean giving them the odd swig of sherry or claret cup.'

Jane Robinson compares Nightingale's stringently clinical fight against disease with Seacole's homely instinct to make things feel better to the victims of suffering. These two very different characters each contributed massively to the care of soldiers in the Crimean War. Arguably, they provide early examples of the art and the science of nursing.

Over the years many eminent nurses have attempted to provide a definition of nursing. In 1966, for example, the late American nurse and author Virginia Henderson defined it thus: 'The unique function of the nurse is to assist the individual, sick or well, in the

performance of those activities contributing to health or its recovery (or to a peaceful death) that he would perform unaided if he had the necessary strength, will or knowledge. And to do this in such a way as to help him gain independence as rapidly as possible'. (Henderson 1966). But does this unique function encapsulate the core values of nursing? Nightingale herself once wrote that she believed the very elements of nursing are all but unknown.

What do modern nurses believe are the core values, the basic principles of nursing? At Royal College of Nursing Publishing we produce a range of journals for nurses, including the weekly flagship Nursing Standard. In November 2004 Nursing Standard launched a major series looking at the core beliefs that traditionally underpin nursing. In the introductory article, Professor Stephen Wright writes about the unprecedented tidal wave of change that the profession has witnessed: the impact of consumerism on health care, of feminism on the doctor-nurse relationship, of education and research on ritual and routine (Wright 2004).

Over subsequent weeks many eminent nurse writers provided their own ideas about the core values of nursing. One article spoke of the 'futile debate' concerning the art or science of nursing work, preferring instead to suggest that 'In a sense, nursing is a craft: 'Craft workers aim to use skill and knowledge to satisfy the demands or expectations of patrons or customers, while satisfying their own aesthetic and technical ambitions'. (Barker and Buchanan-Barker 2004).

In one of the articles nursing was described as a continuous process (Dennis 2004). In another, well-known nurse journalist Jane Salvage said that nurses continue to heed their inner call to be of service and that the challenge now is for nurses to 'rehabilitate the idea of vocation, dust off the layer of embarrassment and secrecy, and forge a new collective ideal of service' (Salvage 2004). Nursing at its best, she said, though ironically often invisible, is love made visible.

Some of the other core values identified by different authors over subsequent weeks included compassion, holism, listening, healing, professionalism, caring and creativity. It's quite a package.

Some of the articles in the series echoed the views of Alison Kitson who wrote about the essence of nursing in *Nursing Standard* in 1999. Kitson makes reference to a metaphor of the nurse as a 'skilled companion' where companionship focuses on the ability of nurses to 'be with' the patient as well as 'doing things' for them (Campbell 1984). Kitson argues that: 'The first essence or essential element in nursing is the philosophical and moral recognition of nursing as a person-centred activity'. This, she says, involves the nurse: '...paying attention to detail, uncovering meaning in everyday situations, being attentive and available, reliable and true to promises, understanding the importance of each person's own particular biography and how they are seeking to gain an understanding of what is happening to them.'

And so we see how some of the finest writers on nursing perceive its core values. But what of the practitioners? What of the nurses out there working with patients? As they cope with constant change in every aspect of their working lives, are they managing to protect the basic principles of nursing so eloquently written about by their colleagues? We certainly believe so at *Nursing Standard*. For many years we have been running annual awards with the Royal College of Nursing that recognise and reward nurses from right across the UK. We have had some stunning examples of winning nurses who are coping with rapid change and demonstrably providing excellent nursing care with intelligence, insight and energy.

Many hail from Wales, of course. Last year Andrea Evans, a district nursing sister and community practice teacher at Carmarthenshire NHS Trust impressed the judges with her idea of using Entonox – gas and air – to control pain when changing wound dressings. In quite a different area of care Sue Sutton, a prison nurse in Monmouthshire, set up an exercise programme for older prisoners which had a remarkable effect on their morale. There are innumerable examples of nurse-led innovations in care, from NHS Direct to the former practice nurse who now employs a GP (Leifer 2005). Sometimes it is external factors such as the reduction in junior doctors' hours that influence the development of the nursing role and sometimes it is nurses themselves spotting and filling gaps in services.

Nurses are everywhere, but how well is the profession understood? Just over a year ago, Nursing Standard launched a campaign called Nursing the Future. It was partly in response to the negative press coverage I referred to earlier ('Too clever to care, too posh to wash'). Harriet Sergeant of the centre-right think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, has been publicly extremely critical of nursing. Her views can be read in the Nursing Standard in a head to head interview with RCN General Secretary, Beverly Malone (Waters 2005). The campaign idea was inspired by a US campaign on nursing's future supported by a \$20 million budget from Johnson & Johnson. It had a tremendous impact and we set out to see what Nursing Standard and its readers could achieve. The Nursing Standard Nursing the Future campaign was born and set out to:

- Enhance the image and reputation of nursing and midwifery
- Challenge and dispel misconceptions about nursing and midwifery
- Empower nurses and midwives to publicise what they do
- Encourage nurses and midwives to 'sell' or talk up their professions to future generations
- Raise the public voice and profile of nurses and midwives
- Encourage more respect for the professions.

We undertook a MORI poll showing that nurses are seen as caring but uneducated and that nursing is an unpopular career choice with confusion about the role of nurses and health care assistants.

We sent out journalists across the UK and found stereotypical images of nursing alive and well. Nursing obviously needs to do more to attract young people into the profession but money, stress and the yuk factor put them off and nursing is viewed as low status.

Inspired by Bob the Builder we ran a competition for readers to come up with a nursing cartoon character and Nurse Fiona Sneddon came up with the winning entry, Nina the Nurse.

We thought perhaps we needed to rebrand nursing and sought the advice of marketing

and image experts. Nursing, they told us, is a marketer's dream but its image needs to move from Skoda to the fast lane. We were advised to get nursing to speak up for itself. And so we handpicked 25 ambassadors to be the faces and voices of our campaign. The Royal College of Nursing provided them with media training and reminded them about using local newspapers. Local journalists are always looking for stories especially about health and nurses. The ambassadors, offered key messages – they were proud to nurse and keen on explaining nursing to the public. Through the pages of Nursing Standard we began to explore patients' experiences of nursing. We could only dream about that million dollar budget backing the US campaign when we thought about a major advertising campaign. But the Nursing Standard campaign really captured the imagination of our readers and some influential supporters. One Trust chief executive said that nursing is attracting those with scientific minds, not just sensitive natures.

We also asked our readers what gets them out of bed in the mornings. The response was overwhelming. Many of them told us it was the first time they had been asked about what they liked about the job, rather than what they did not and 94% said they are proud to be nurses. Reassuringly, patients are the number one reason why they stay in the job. As ambassador Tracey Lavery puts it; 'It's obvious I make a difference. I have thought about moving...but caring for people is a key requirement for me.'

We found that Nursing Standard readers welcomed the campaign to improve the image of nursing as inspirational and an opportunity at last to say something positive about their work.

I have only touched upon some aspects of a year-long campaign. It culminated with a rebranding exercise produced by the company Red Spider, the best in the business – you can see their redprint (blueprint) on the Nursing Standard website (www.nursing-standard.co.uk). And as a result of that we invited award-winning film maker Nick Shipley to make a film about nursing.

Using just some of the marvellous Nursing Standard campaign ambassadors, Nick made a film 'Quiet Power', that we will be giving away to our readers with the May 4 2005 issue. Nurses' Day is coming up on May 12 and we'll be asking them to use the film in

schools, in clubs, in cinemas, at work, wherever nursing should be promoted. I think that the film and that these ambassadors for nursing have helped to persuade nursing does indeed remain true to its basic principles. Coupled with the confidence to develop its skills, the profession should be well equipped to cope with the many challenges it faces now and in the future.

I am going to end with the words of another of the profession's eminent nurses, a former president of the International Council of Nurses, Marguerita Styles. She wrote an immensely moving declaration of belief about the nature and purpose of nursing and this is a short extract from that declaration:

'I believe in nursing as an occupational force for social good, a force that in the totality of its concern for all human health states provides a distinct and unique service...I believe in myself and in my nursing colleagues: in our right to be fulfilled, to be recognised, and to be rewarded as valued members of society.'

References

- Baly M (Ed) (1991) *As Miss Nightingale said...* London, Scutari Press.
- Barker P, Buchanan-Barker P (2004) Caring as a craft. *Nursing Standard* 19, 9, 17-18.
- Campbell A (1984) Nursing, nurturing and sexism. In Campbell A (Ed) *Moderated Love: a Theology of Professional Care*. London, SPCK.
- Dennis S (2004) A profession like no other. *Nursing Standard* 19, 9, 19.
- Henderson V (1966) *The Nature of Nursing: A definition and its implications for practice, research, and education*. New York, Macmillan.
- Kitson A (1999) The essence of nursing. *Nursing Standard* 13, 23, 42-46.
- Kitson A (2004) The whole person. *Nursing Standard* 19, 12, 14-15.
- Leifer D (2005) My practice (nurse-led general practice). *Nursing Standard* 19, 22, 58.
- Robinson J (2005) *Mary Seacole: The Charismatic Black Nurse Who Became a Heroine of the Crimea*. London, Constable and Robinson.
- Salvage J (2004) The call to nurture. *Nursing Standard* 19, 10, 16-17.

Seacole M (2004) *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*. London, The X Press.

Waters A (2005) The gloves are off. *Nursing Standard* 19, 32, 22-23.

Wright S (2004) The value of values. *Nursing Standard* 19, 9, 15-16.