

The Lamp Still Burns: Nurses on the Forefront of COVID-19, Health Disparities, and Gender Inequities

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Much has changed since the days of Florence Nightingale, but many struggles and obstacles to health remain. Strategies to support nursing are critical to keep the lamp burning.

Florence Nightingale and her team of nurses were instrumental in creating strategic nursing interventions at a British military hospital when caring for soldiers in the Crimean War (National Army Museum, n.d.). These interventions included an unprecedented level of comprehensive care – from implementing rigorous practices for handwashing and clean linens, to writing letters to families on behalf of soldiers, to treating and comforting patients overnight – even as the male doctors slept (Haynes, 2020). She earned the nickname “The Lady With the Lamp,” and set the standard for modern nursing (The National Archives, n.d.).

Alarmed at the rates of cholera and typhoid killing the young men in her care, Nightingale pioneered the use of statistics and data graphics to illustrate that it was germs, not guns, causing the vast majority of soldiers’ deaths (Science Museum, n.d.). She professed that effective sanitary and hygienic practices could, in fact, save lives. By the time the war was over, she was well on her way to making medical history.

In honor of the 200th anniversary of Nightingale’s birth, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020a) has declared 2020 the *International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife*. Her contributions to professionalizing nursing, developing data science, and creating public health protocols should provide the foundation of our response to the coronavirus pandemic. But 160 years after Nightingale set up the first training school for nurses, we face a global nursing shortage that not only puts millions of lives at

immediate risk, but pushes her goal of a healthier, more just world she imagined further out of reach.

According to a new report by the WHO (2020b), the International Council of Nurses, and Nursing Now, almost 6 million more nurses are needed to meet global demand; almost 90% of that shortage affects low and middle-income countries. Many nurses are recruited away from their countries of birth or training to higher-income countries, which worsens the inequitable distribution of skilled nursing. And, as the report explains, some regions – particularly in the west – having an aging nursing workforce; globally, one of every six nurses will retire in the next 10 years.

Strategies for Supporting Nursing

As we grapple with a global pandemic, people around the world are applauding essential healthcare workers, including nurses, who are putting their lives on the line to save the rest of us. But despite our understanding of the critical role that nurses play – not just in a time of COVID-19, but every day – we are not doing nearly enough to ensure that more people enter into and stay in the profession. If we are to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.) by 2030 and work toward universal health coverage, then we as a global community must follow the WHO’s (2020c) recommendations and invest more in the healthcare workforce, particularly in nurses and midwives.

Strategies for Supporting Nurses

First, almost 6 million nurses must be educated and employed to meet the shortfall in countries that have the most urgent needs. A diverse nursing workforce must be built and supported that, in the tradition of Nightingale, combines compassionate care, clinical skills, and cutting-edge science and technology to cope with evolving, complex clinical and population health challenges in a rapidly changing world. To adequately fund such efforts, low and middle-income countries must work in partnership with international development and financing organizations. This investment will be worth every penny because nurses and midwives make a huge difference in the health and development of families and communities.

Managing Migration

Second, an ethical, strategic approach must be developed to monitor and manage nurse migration. For starters, wealthier countries that today rely heavily on migrant nurses need to cultivate a stronger domestic nursing workforce. And developing countries that are experiencing a nursing brain drain must focus on recruitment and retention efforts so that their best-trained nurses stay and help build a stronger health infrastructure.

A Seat at the Table

Third, nurses must have a prominent seat at the public health and policymaking table. These seats are too often denied because of systemic sexism against the female-dominated nursing field. Nurse leaders need to drive conversations about collecting workforce data, modernizing regulations, and developing new ways to recruit, educate, and retain the next generation of nurses. Policymakers, regulators, and providers need to work together to ensure nurses are treated respectfully, compensated fairly, and protected from harassment and discrimination. This includes honestly grappling with the reality that nursing is still an unnecessarily gendered profession, and women often face gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and a dearth of leadership and career development opportunities.

Health Policy

Fourth, nurses' expertise must be engaged when it comes to broader questions of health policy. The coronavirus pandemic is a grim reminder of what we've long understood — nurses are working, and dying, on the frontlines of global health. They are eyewitnesses to what works and what doesn't in health systems, which means they can help get us out of our current crisis and help prevent the next one.

Conclusion

Much has changed since the days of Florence Nightingale, but there are also many things that haven't. We would do well to heed her prescient words (McDonald, 2009): "For us who nurse, our nursing is a thing, which, unless we are making progress in it, every year, every month, every week, take my word for it, we are going back" (p. 761). This year, as we honor her legacy, let's also honor the millions of nurses around the world who carry her spirit so we don't go back, but instead move forward, by supporting the next generation of Nightingales. \$

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