

Thank Heavens for nurses everywhere ...

This is the 15th blog by Rebecca Lloyd of the Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) in the series on The People's Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland. This month, the theme is around this line of the People's Charter:

I and the people who care for me can get the practical services and support we need



Where else would we turn to when thinking about patient care than to the part that nurses play in looking after our health and wellbeing? Nurses are the lynchpins of our care so today's blog centres on them and is dedicated to them.

I don't think we can talk about nursing without giving a nod to Florence Nightingale, arguably the founder of modern nursing. Florence Nightingale's "Notes on Nursing" is the first textbook for modern nursing written. Based on her first-hand experiences during the Crimean War, it is written for laypeople and professionals alike.

In it, she writes that all nursing has to start with the basics. She grabs us from the first page by saying her book is;

'to give hints for thought to women who have personal charge of the health of others. Every woman, or at least almost every woman, has, at one time or another of her life, the charge of the personal health of somebody, whether child or invalid, -- in other words, every woman is a nurse.'

Ahem – we will forgive the blatant sexism. Let's remember that Nightingale was a nurse in the 1800s. However, much of what Nightingale imparted to readers 200 years ago is still so very important to us today. She praises the frequency of washing hands with soap and also asserted the importance of keeping both the patient and bedding as clean as possible for better health. She emphasises the importance of patient observation and the need for clear communication to the patient and about the patient. All medical providers, she said, should always be good at communicating for the best plan of treatment to be formulated.

Nothing wrong with that at all.

Nightingale also exhibits stern disapproval of nurses wearing (then) fashionable skirts. The noise of their rustling was at best distracting and of detriment to a patient's health, but, at worst, crinoline skirts could catch on fire and burn the nurse (and patient) to death. It happened more often than you think. Applause for modern uniforms for nurses - and lack of naked flames!!

I digress.

The medical advice of Nightingale is admittedly outdated. But she is still bang on when it comes to compassion. She urges her younger students to read to patients and gives tips on speed, and topic. She encourages patients to receive visitors (as long as they are clean and not unwell). Most important of all is the open window and fresh air, and a view on the outside world. "Cleanliness, fresh air from open windows, are the only defence a true nurse either asks or needs," she wrote.

But what about today's nurses? What do they think is the most important part of nursing?

I spoke to a few nurses to write this blog – here is what they had to say.

Colette said:

"It's so important to give compassion and care in everything you do. This is how I approach my nursing care. I often ask myself if my patient was my mother - would getting a bath once a week be enough? Absolutely not! I use this principle to guide the care I give. I always give my very best to my patients."

Mairead spoke about how she relied on her senses:

"I use all my senses when I am assessing a patient. I always gently touch them. The best advice I was ever given was to never take someone else's word for it. People can be very stoic. They can tell you they are

not in pain. They don't want to make a fuss. So I always take 30 seconds and look at my patient and gently touch their skin on their arms or forehead to gather information. You can tell a great deal about pain by the look on someone's face and by touching them to see if they are cold and clammy or warm and dry- sometimes these things can tell you more than the "numbers".

Marie thought what is important is putting the puzzle of illness together.

"I am always thinking about putting all the pieces together. Every single one of my patients is unique and distinct. Each has a different history, background, lifestyle and body than anyone else. I look beyond just the physical. I am interested in the emotional, psychological, psychosocial factors, environment, cultural perspectives and their past – they are all important, and all worthy of consideration when giving care. We now know so much illness can be attributed to merely the inequality of birth. Depending on where we are born, health can at risk because of lack of quality food, lack of affordable housing, lack of transportation and access to health care facilities. We must recognise how vulnerable these patients are."

Lorcan's thoughts concentrate on the wellbeing of the families of patients.

"Families are our greatest resource in helping our patients. I find that the family is intimately connected to the patient and in getting patients better and to remain so. It is imperative to include as much of the support system the patient has in place. Being able to tell two or three people important instructions or explanations of diagnosis and aftercare are always going to be better than just giving information to the patient on their own."

Ann, a nurse for over 30 years, tell us that for her the patient is the centre of all her work;

"It's my job to be a strong and informed advocate for my patient. I have 30 years of knowledge and experience that my patient probably doesn't have; it is my job, therefore, to make sure my patient benefits from this experience! When I know something is not in my patient's best interests – I'm not afraid to speak up!! I am not afraid of questioning doctor's, policies, procedures if they don't make sense to the wellbeing of my patient. My job is to put all the options on the table so they can make a fully informed choice. I am a professional working on behalf of my patient and their family, and I take this responsibility very seriously. To have integrity you must speak for your patients, they are vulnerable and are counting on us literal strangers to speak for them. I am aware even now I don't always have all the answers but I am willing to ask the questions, and I am willing and able to find resources around me."

Finally, Deirdre says nurses must also practice 'self-care'.

"I've realised how important it is to look after myself. I have found I am not in a position to help and care for people if I am not firing on all cylinders. I think nurses need to be role models in matters of health and work towards healthy lifestyle habits that are in line with healthy living and longevity. Prevention is as important as treatment. I try to; I am always trying to eat healthily, be more active, have a good sleep and have a good work and home balance. I try to live my life with gratitude and think I bring my positivity into my nursing life."

Wow, let's just take a moment on how blessed we are that these people are caring for us. There are all too many opportunities for us to criticise our health service, but we must take time and reflect on what we do have. Passionate, practical, professionals who have taken up nursing to care compassionately for us. And how vital is that care, support, passion, compassion, advocacy and professionalism in particular when we are faced with dying and death?

So before I finish, I want to share a little story from a friend of mine whose daughter has been receiving care for a serious illness. When I asked her what she thought about the nurses she said:

"They provide light in the darkest of situations, humour where there seems to be none, compassion when you are lost, care when you are broken. We could not have made this journey without the help of nurses. Say thank you for me...."

So nurses everywhere – in acute, maternity and psychiatric hospitals, in the community, in our homes, in hospices, in community practices, in public health and palliative care and in every speciality - thank you for how you care for us from the moment we enter this world to the moment we leave it. Your work is hugely valued by those you care for. The little things you do are so important, like the care you give and the knowledge you share. Thank you.

Just a reminder, in the darkest of situations and in the darkest hours the Nurses for Night Care nurses care for and assist people at end of life and their families. The IHF funds this service so people who are dying at home can have the professional care and support they and their families need in those crucial last weeks of life. If you or your loved one is receiving this service, our thoughts are with you and your family.

Finally, finally, take a moment now to say thank you: retweet this message, repost and share, follow the #celebratenurses Let's get it trending for all the right reasons.

*Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others
and the stories they share about you.”*

— Shannon L. Alder

[You can read more about The People’s Charter on Dying, Death in Ireland here](#)

[Learn more about the Nurses for Night Care Service](#)

[The Irish Hospice Foundation also hosts a number of workshops for people helping those facing death. For more information, click here](#)

The Irish Hospice Foundation is the only charity dedicated to dying, death and bereavement in Ireland. 80 people die in Ireland every day and the IHF believes everyone has the right to be cared for and to die with dignity and respect in the care setting of their choice. Our mission is to strive for the best end-of-life and bereavement care, for all. The IHF campaigns to make excellence in hospice practices, bereavement and end-of-life care a national priority and to stimulate the conversation about dying, death and bereavement in Ireland. Full details: www.hospicefoundation.ie