The Nursing Ethos

Each year, on the day that would have been her birthday, there is a service at Westminster Abbey, London to commemorate Florence Nightingale’s life and celebrate the nursing profession. A lamp is taken from the Nurses’ Chapel at the Abbey and handed from one nurse to the next nurse during the service. The last person the lamp is handed to is the Dean who then places the symbolic lamp onto the High Altar.

This ceremony is done to signify the passing of knowledge from one nurse to another, much like Florence Nightingale did when she set up her Schools of Nursing. It also signifies her nickname The Lady of the Lamp. The reason that Nurses Day is held on the 12th May each year is because this is the birth date of Florence Nightingale. She made many reforms to nursing and health care and drastically cut the death rate amongst soldiers in the Crimean War as a result of her hard work, dedication and training of fellow nurses.

Historically, developing the “compassionate character” was the impetus for care, and gave the nursing profession its ethos. In Florence Nightingale’s view, good nurses were good people who cultivated certain virtues or qualities in their character – one of which was compassion. Patients were expected to be the centre of all nurses’ thoughts. Nurses had to always be kind (but never emotional) because they were caring for living people, unlike plumbers or carpenters. As Nightingale reiterated in letters to probationer nurses, it is what the nurse is inside that counts, “the rest is only the outward shell or envelope” (Nightingale, 1873-1897).

From Nightingale’s time until the 1960s, numerous nurse writers championed similar ideas of care. Most textbooks began with an introductory chapter on the moral basis of nursing and the importance of developing a virtuous character. Writers used the same language and approach as Nightingale.

One of the earliest was Florence Lees, who oversaw the care of the wounded in the Franco-Prussian War. She listed the qualities nurses needed to learn in training school, which were cleanliness, neatness, obedience, sobriety, truthfulness, honesty, punctuality, trustworthiness, quickness and orderliness. Nurses also had to be patient, cheerful and kindly (Lees, 1874).

Nurse training was about becoming kind and compassionate, as well as technically competent. Nursing teachers believed that, in order for nurses to be compassionate, they needed to be trained to develop a compassionate character.

1. Government and nursing bodies agree patients have a right to be treated with compassion
2. Historically, developing a “compassionate character” was the impetus for care, and gave the nursing profession it’s ethos
3. Throughout nursing history, compassion has been viewed as a quality associated with an individual’s character
4. Compassion is about the intent and practiced disposition of the nurse
5. Genuine compassionate care is not a quantifiable skill, an assumed technique or an emotion or feeling – it is the humane quality of kindness

Each year, on the 12th of May, nurses celebrate nursing and raise the profile of their work in a variety of ways and events. Few can say they are untouched by the hard work and dedication of nurses in the UK and throughout the world and International Nurses Day is an opportunity to learn about the work of nurses and their workplaces.

This year the Clinical Team at 111 Piccadilly are concentrating upon the importance of the work environment and our working culture with a view to improving the efficiency of the team and the promotion of a clear understanding of all our different roles.