The History of Florence Nightingale

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October 12, 2018

HIST 151-07

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Although she did not wear a military uniform nor carry a musket, some might say that Florence Nightingale was a hero during the Crimean War. Through her transformational leadership and vision, Florence Nightingale insured that nurses were properly trained to offer care to the wounded. She became known as the “Lady with the Lamp” due to her walking and checking on the wounded during the late hours of the night.[[1]](#footnote-1) With far less technology and resources than we have available today, Florence Nightingale understood the importance of sanitation, cleanliness, and hygiene and the impact it had on people’s personal health. Nightingale established a credible reputation for nursing during her time and to this day it remains some of the core foundations of the profession. The Lady with the Lamp not only cared for the wounded and trained nurses during the Crimean War, but she lit the way for generations of nurses to come.

In the year 1853, the Crimean War broke out between the allied French and British against the Russians. This war was over control of the territory of the Ottoman Empire. The Russians wanted to take full control over this empire. As the war went on, more soldiers were being wounded and thus being sent to a military hospital nearby. This hospital was filthy and would not be tolerated in today’s society due to the work of Florence Nightingale. In this military hospital there were no women working as nurses until 1854 when Sidney Herbert sent Florence Nightingale a letter asking her to come to the hospital and bring a group of nurses with her because of the vast amounts of soldiers who were coming into the hospital.[[2]](#footnote-2) He claimed that Ms. Nightingale would have authority over all the nurses as well as full cooperation and assistance from the medical staff in Scutari.[[3]](#footnote-3) A few days later, she left with thirty-eight nurses accompanying her along with a few nuns from the church that wanted to be of service.[[4]](#footnote-4)Few of them had never practiced nursing before, and it was up to Nightingale to teach them the ins and outs of the profession.

When she arrived, patients were laying on the floor due to the lack of space in the hospital. There were men laying in double rows all along the hallways of the hospital. Eventually, Florence Nightingale got the hospital back in order and more patients were being discharged back to the field or back home to their families. The hospital never again was that chaotic and unorganized due to her efforts with her nurses. There was also a lack of attention to patients; many would not be able to move, provide discharge, and be left to lay in their feces while the nurses and doctors tended to other patients.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Summers, Nightingale did a poor job of being in charge of all the nurses. She believed that the nuns were the most important people who came to the hospital during the Crimean War.[[6]](#footnote-6) When Nightingale arrived, all of that changed; the wounded were tended to and the beds were changed regularly. Even when the patient was not gravely ill, according to Nightingale, “the sheets must be aired out every 12 hours.”[[7]](#footnote-7)This resulted in soldiers having better health due to the cleaner environment around them. In nursing today, people still abide by the implications of Florence Nightingale; sheets in each room are washed and rotated after each patient. Also, the mattress itself is sanitized after a patient leaves and before the next one enters.

The Lady with the Lamp was very stringent on cleanliness in her hospital during the war, and she had every right to be. The doctors and nurses in the hospital would not wash their hands between patients or clean the rooms. She claimed, “a great part of nursing is preserving cleanliness.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This is true even in today’s nursing profession. Today, nurses must sanitize their hands when they enter and exit a room with a patient and after every patient leaves; they must clean and disinfect the whole room before the next patient arrives. Without proper sanitation of the room or the nurses and doctors, patients are more at risk of getting an infection or virus. Part of sanitation in the hospital meant that the nurses needed to find alternate clothing for the soldiers to wear. When Florence Nightingale and her nurses arrived, there were men still in their bloodied uniforms due to the lack of supplies.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nightingale changed this. Directly after she arrived, she wrote to the local newspaper from back home, asked for supply donations, and was met with many supplies coming her way. Women all over England such as Queen Victoria started making clothes for the soldiers that were wounded in the hospital.[[10]](#footnote-10) Today in hospitals, while there are not full pairs of clothes for patients, there are gowns which many serious patients are directed to wear for their stay.

Along with cleanliness, Florence Nightingale also made sure her nurses were tending to their patients well and providing proper care. Nightingale would often do rounds multiple times throughout the day to check on patients and see if they needed anything. She often encouraged her nurses to do the same to maintain order in the hospital and give the soldiers the proper care they needed. Nightingale believed that nurses should be taught how to observe patients and what symptoms indicate a patient is getting better versus which symptoms indicate a patient is getting worse.[[11]](#footnote-11) This continues to be taught to nurses today; nurses must know different diseases and illnesses and the symptoms. Modern-day nurses also must know symptoms for the recovery of patients. Nurses today do multiple rounds to check on their patients; about every hour a nurse will check on her patient. Without Florence Nightingale, nurses today would not be as effective in the hospital setting if they were not taught the symptoms of a variety of illnesses. Today, many patients would not be as healthy or able to leave as fast if nurses did not do their rounds to ensure their patients were getting the proper care they deserved.

The Lady with the Lamp also emphasized how nurses should be taking notes about the activities of their patients.[[12]](#footnote-12) She believed that this would be beneficial in the military hospital because of the vast number of soldiers who were there. If the nurses were taking notes on their patients then the doctors would not have to spend as much time with each patient, and they could see more patients in a day. This helped move more patients out of the hospital and recover much faster due to the watchful eyes of the nurses. The work of notes from the nurses helped the doctors determine what illness or infection their patient had. Today, nurses still take notes on their patients to help the doctors with their diagnosis as well as ensuring their patients receive the proper care.

Overall, Florence Nightingale changed the profession of nursing through implications of cleanliness, sanitation, and establishing rounds to check on patients. Without the work of the Lady with the Lamp, nursing as a profession would not be as advanced as it is today. Patients would be prone to various infections from the hospital and other patients if Florence Nightingale never implemented her sanitation restrictions in the hospital. Today, nurses learn about the works of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War because she was so impactful, and her work was revolutionary for her time. Modern-day nurses still practice what she taught her nurses during the war. Altogether, her teachings made a large impact in the nursing profession and thus created better nurses in the process. The nurses that worked with Nightingale during the Crimean War went off to work in other hospitals around Europe and helped other people. Florence Nightingale continues to influence more nurses into bettering themselves even today.

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2. Sidney Herbert to Florence Nightingale, October 15, 1854 (Scutari, Turkey), in Florence Nightingale, *Florence Nightingale: Letters from the Crimea*, ed. Sue M. Goldie (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eileen Magnello, “Florence Nightingale: A Victorian Statistician.” *Mathematics In School* 39, no. 3 (2010): 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elisabeth Robinson Scovil, “Florence Nightingale.” *The American Journal of Nursing* 14, no. 1 (October 1913): 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Anne Summers, “Pride and Prejudice: Ladies and Nurses in the Crimean War.” *History Workshop*, no. 16 (1983): 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is and What it is Not* (Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 1992), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Elisabeth Robinson Scovil, “Florence Nightingale.” *The American Journal of Nursing* 14, no. 1 (October 1913): 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is and What it is Not* (Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 1992), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)