

A Light in the Darkness:

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE'S LEGACY

Florence Nightingale, a pioneer of nursing, was born on May 12, 1820. In celebration of her 200th birthday, the World Health Organization declared 2020 the “Year of the Nurse and Midwife.” It's now clear that nurses and health care providers of all kinds face extraordinary circumstances this year.

Nightingale had a lasting influence on patient care that's apparent even today.



Nightingale earned the nickname “the Lady with the Lamp” because she checked on patients at night, which was rare at the time and especially rare for head nurses to do.

COURTESY OF THE WELLCOME COLLECTION



When Florence Nightingale was growing up in England in the early 19th century, nursing was not yet a respected profession. It was a trade that involved little training. Women from upper-class families like hers were not expected to handle strangers' bodily functions. She defied her family because she saw nursing as a calling.

Beginning in 1854, Nightingale led a team of nurses in the Crimean War, stationed in present-day Turkey. She saw that the overcrowded, stuffy hospital with an overwhelmed sewer system was leading to high death rates. She wrote to newspapers back home, inspiring the construction of a new hospital.

In celebration of:



2020
INTERNATIONAL YEAR
OF THE NURSE AND
THE MIDWIFE

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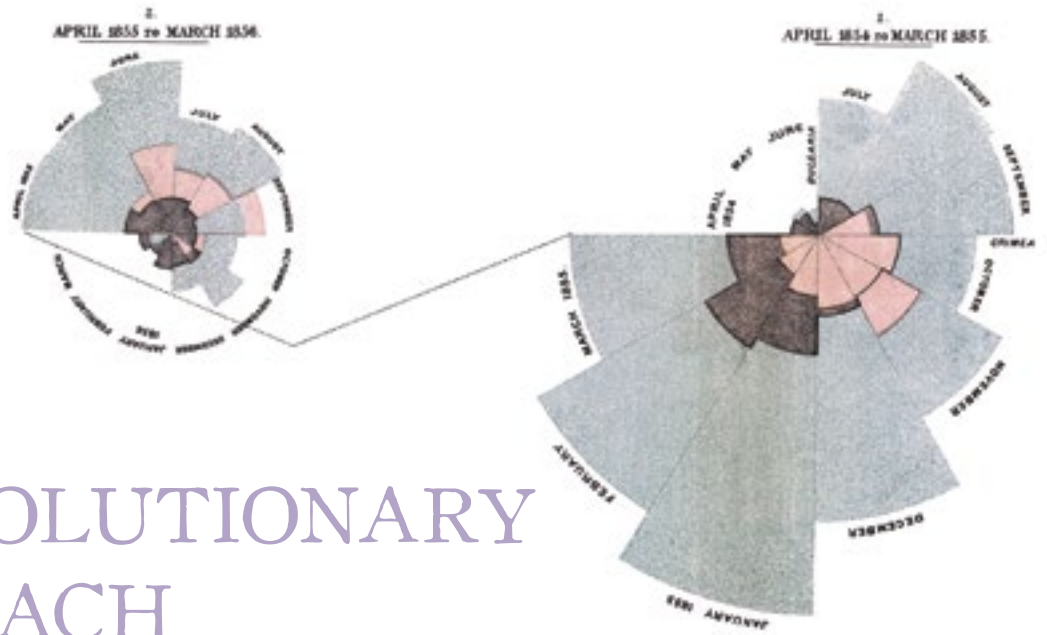
MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

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MEDICAL HISTORY AND INNOVATION



Nightingale, who wrote several books on hospital and nursing practice, is often portrayed with a letter or writing materials.

COURTESY OF THE WELLCOME COLLECTION



A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

After the war, Nightingale founded the Nightingale Training School at St. Thomas's Hospital in London. Germ theory, the now-proven concept that viruses and bacteria cause infectious disease, was new in the mid-19th century. Nightingale believed in the older miasma theory, in which “bad air” caused disease. Still, she campaigned for regular hand washing and clean hospital conditions. Conventional thinking at the time considered these optional at best.

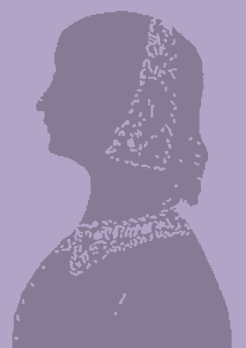
Nightingale kept detailed records of disease rates and mortality. She used these statistics to improve practice, well before this was common. She was the first woman elected to the Royal Statistical Society.

Nightingale created cutting-edge charts, like this one, which displayed the causes of deaths of soldiers in the Crimean War by month. The vast majority, represented in blue, were “preventable or mitigable” disease.

COURTESY OF THE WELLCOME COLLECTION

“Wise and humane management of the patient is the best safeguard against infection.”

- FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE
in *Notes on Nursing*, 1859



AMERICA'S FIRST TRAINED NURSE MEETS THE LADY WITH THE LAMP

Linda Richards was the first graduate of a professional nursing program in the United States. In 1877, Richards visited St. Thomas's Hospital Training School. Richards met with Nightingale, spent one week each observing eight wards, and attended many operations before observing a few other hospitals at Nightingale's suggestion. Richards became a leader in nurse training, influencing MGH and many other hospitals in the U.S. and abroad.

Seven MGH nursing leaders are in the front row of this photo from the 1915 reunion of the MGH Nurses' Alumnae Association. Linda Richards, not an alumna but a former superintendent of the school, is on the far right.

"Great was my surprise when I received an invitation to visit her ... Even now I can distinctly recall with what fear and trembling I walked toward the house of the woman who had for years been such an inspiration to me and to countless others...whose name and the record of whose good works were known throughout the civilized world."

- LINDA RICHARDS, 1911



LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Nightingale emphasized taking care of patients' basic needs and comforts, like cleanliness and allowing them a good night's sleep. Data-driven practice and patient-centered care are at the heart of Nightingale's legacy. Though seemingly opposite, they are both essential to nursing.

In 2004, the MGH Nursing Alumnae Committee commissioned this sundial. The artist, Nancy Schön, created the Make Way for Ducklings sculpture in the Boston Public Garden. The sundial's smallest figure carries a lamp to symbolize Florence Nightingale and nursing's past.



“The greatest heroes are those who do their duty in the daily grind of domestic affairs whilst the world whirls.”

- ATTRIBUTED TO FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

