

COMMUNITY SPACE

WHAT IS NURSING & WHAT IS A NURSE?

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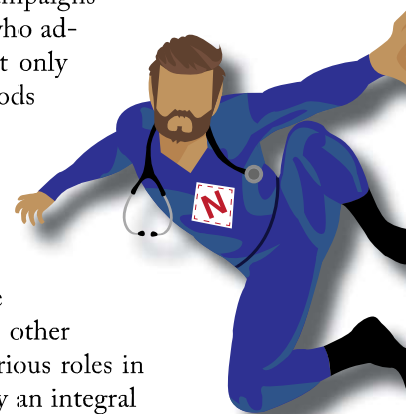
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Welcome to a new section of *The Meducator*, published in collaboration with the School of Nursing. This is a new feature in *The Meducator*, but nursing certainly isn't a novel addition to the health sciences. So, where did we come from, and where are we going?

Most people believe that the history of nursing began with Florence Nightingale. In reality, she was a part of the relatively recent formalization of a long history of informal roles spanning many cultures. As early as the seventh century, both Islamic and Christian orders established informal roles of providing services to, and advocating for, the marginalized and weak in society.^{1,2,3} Prior to that, oral tradition established common archetypal figures, such as the 'healer' or 'witch', who provide pseudo-mystical care in psychosocial, physical, and spiritual domains.⁴

The formalization of nursing as a secular profession did begin with Florence Nightingale, and many picture her as "The Lady with the Lamp," dedicated to the care of wounded soldiers.⁵ However, the development of nursing as a profession extends far beyond this traditional picture. Nightingale's longest-lasting contributions to the nursing profession are those of evidence-based research. Deeply affected by the high mortality she witnessed during the Crimean War, Nightingale pressed to investigate the causes. Her findings, which linked soldier mortality with poor sanitation, inspired a recommendation for disease and mortality records which would allow problems to be identified and resolved more promptly.⁵ This research became one of the most successful knowledge translation campaigns on sanitation of the 19th century, establishing Nightingale as a pioneer who advanced the nursing profession.⁵ She demonstrated that nurses could not only promote physical, psychosocial, and spiritual health, but also apply empirical, scientific methods to induce individual and societal change.

While the root of nursing has often been associated with women—even the Latin origin of the word *nutrire* means to suckle—this profession is not solely associated with feminine characteristics. In fact, the rise of male nurses has paralleled the rise of female physicians since the 1970s, with the number of men qualified as registered nurses having tripled in the past 40 years.⁶ However, nursing has not often had the social prestige that is attached to other health professions. An unclear definition of the nursing profession, complicated by the various roles in which nurses are employed, may contribute to this phenomenon.^{7,8} Nonetheless, nurses play an integral role in the interprofessional health care team. They work alongside surgeons in the operating room, radiographers in diagnostic imaging, physiotherapists in rehabilitation, social workers in family services, epidemiologists in public health, and midwives in labour and delivery. Nurses practise autonomously in areas all over the world; advanced practice nurses are the primary health care providers for approximately one million Canadians.^{9,10} The possibilities of the nursing profession are almost limitless.



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