

Virginia Henderson:

her definition of nursing
applies more than ever to
home care practice

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Virginia Avenel Henderson

*was a rare woman
and nurse.*

Her death on March 19, 1996 at the age of 98 years marks an end of an era in nursing. She continued to think and to grow professionally, even while she was a seasoned mentor to those generations younger than she. She was generous with her time and interest in others, especially those nurses "coming along." We have lessons to learn and to remember from her example.

Virginia enjoyed most to sit in her gracious and comfortable living room among her collections of paintings, books, porcelain boxes, and other artifacts that were memories from her travels and read or visit with friends, students, or professional colleagues. Conversation was an art for her, and she thrived on it. She was interested in discussions of wide-ranging topics, always having an opinion but equally as interested in the opinion of others.

What I remember most about Virginia was her charm and style. Some would describe it as from an earlier era, but her intellect and curiosity

was as current as today's most precocious young person.

I recall Virginia as always being proud of using her hands and of what she could do with them. She was a creative seamstress, designing, and sewing most of her clothes until she was in her early 90s. She hand-wrote letters and notes to people who showed her a special kindness or in response to a social invitation. Her notes included thoughtful personal comments and encourage-

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Editor's note: Virginia Henderson, a great nursing leader of our time, recently passed away, but her life and work has left all of us richer in many ways. *Home Healthcare Nurse* asked Dr. Ruth Knollmueller, a personal and professional friend of Ms. Henderson's, to write about her life, her teachings, and what we as home care nurses can learn from the simple words that defined her philosophy of nursing.

ments. The script was flourishing and the text was always elegant. Virginia would use the cover of a greeting card, recycle it by cutting it out with pinking shears, and paste it onto a folder and insert a calendar to give to friends or put it on plain note paper and use it to write notes. When she observed her 90th birthday in 1988, she received a bouquet of 90 red roses from the Royal College of Nursing in England. Once the roses were spent, she removed the rose petals and made a pot-pourri collection using small baskets or tins to give to her friends as a way of continuing to share the memory. Virginia had generous and creative hands and she loved to use them, and those of us who have received these personal items treasure them.

Professional Nursing Contribution

The first 30-plus years of Virginia's professional life, while productive, were less public years professionally. Her last 30 years were very public, and the time in her life when she became well-known and highly regarded in nursing. She offered her time generously to students and colleagues, always sharing new ideas in nursing education, practice or research, or discussing previously established ones. During the past 20 years or so, she often, in reply to a question, would preface a response in her muted southern accent with "in mah opinion. . ." It was always worth hearing and considering.

Born November 30, 1897, Virginia graduated in 1921 from the Army Nursing School at the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, one of many nurses

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educated in this accelerated program during a great nursing shortage largely due to the patient care needs caused by World War I. Other contemporaries included Lulu Wolf Hasenplug who entered the same program in 1921 and was the founding Dean of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Nursing and who spent her lifetime at that school while assuming other leadership roles professionally; Ruth Weaver Hubbard, a classmate, was active in public health nursing and was associated with the Visiting Nurse Service of Philadelphia for more than 25 years, and finally, Margaret Anthony Tracy, also a classmate, worked in New York City on Henry Street and was a leader in collegiate nursing education associated with the University of California in San Francisco and Berkeley and was the author of the text, "Nursing. An Art and Science." Virginia was, perhaps, the last surviving nurse from this stellar group. She continued her formal education at Teachers College in Columbia University at New York City, earning a Master's degree in 1934 and taught there until coming to Yale University School of Nursing as a research associate in 1953.

The books written by Virginia Henderson, including "Basic Principles of Nursing" (1960, 1969), "Nursing Research: A Survey and Assessment" with Leo Simmons (1964), "The Nature of Nursing" (1966), "Nursing Studies Index" (1972), "Principles and Practice of Nursing" 6th edition with Gladys Nite (1978), and "The Nature of Nursing: Reflections After 25 Years" (1991), are each a major contribution to the nursing literature. Virginia completed the 6th edition of the "Principles and Practice" when she was older than 80 year of age. Earlier editions of this book, formerly, "Textbook of the Principles and Practice of Nursing" was authored as Harmer and Henderson, and was used widely as a nursing fundamentals textbook in nursing schools.

The "Nursing Studies Index," completed in 1972, was a project that took approximately 13 years to complete. In what became four volumes, Virginia gathered, classified, and annotated the text of analytical and historical aspects of every known piece of research on nursing published in English from 1900 to 1959. In conducting this project, Virginia recorded the data on 3 × 5 cards and

sorted them into chronologic and content files. This was the first comprehensive compilation of nursing research. This work built on the work she and Leo Simmons published earlier.

A recognition linked to this great contribution occurred when, in 1990, the International Nursing Society, Sigma Theta Tau, which is located in Indianapolis, IN, named its first electronic, computer nursing library the Virginia Henderson International Nursing Library.

Perhaps younger nurses wonder what all the fuss is about

Care," now in print in 27 languages. The timelessness of her definition of nursing is relevant today and applies to the practice of nursing without respect to the specialty in which a nurse works. The definition mutated somewhat for her, too, as she refined it over the years until 1978 when it was published in "Principles and Practice of Nursing" (p. 6) as follows:

"Nursing is primarily assisting individuals (sick or well) with those activities contributing to health or its re-

nursing were based on data, and she knew how to move the study of nursing away from the individual nurse to the clinical practice of the nurse and, subsequently, to the difference nursing care makes in the life of a patient. She continued to publish articles in professional journals on clinical nursing issues and maintained an active and demanding speaking schedule until her early 90s. Her travels were national and international and resulted in honors from England, Ireland, Japan, Colombia, and Pakistan to mention a few. Academic honors included 12 honorary degrees.

Home Healthcare Nursing

How is the Henderson definition of nursing implemented in the practice of home healthcare? Too often, if not in most instances, the plan of care for a patient in home care is influenced by the payer and based on how long that payer will cover services. Rather, we know as nurses we first should define care by the patient's or family's needs.

The term "services" has become synonymous with "care." Perhaps we need to clarify what is meant by these two terms. Service can mean a task or an activity that is performed for someone. Care can mean having a responsibility for someone. These two words are not interchangeable when used in this way. Caring takes time and requires establishing and developing a relationship. It is a nursing behavior that is sanctioned reluctantly because time is money.

Do the job quickly and leave for the next home visit seems to be the preferred approach. Yet, our role as nurses as defined by Virginia Henderson is to "assist

Virginia's definition of nursing speaks to caring, prevention, health promotion, shared care, rehabilitation, and independent nursing practice.

with this tribute to Virginia Henderson. She was not a stranger to nurses except those nurses who chose to be strangers. She was a warm and generous woman who could speak the language of virtually any nurse. It is apparent that newer nurses are unfamiliar with Virginia and the definition of nursing she developed, one of the greatest single contributions to our profession and provided by her. We must know and understand our past so that the understanding we have for the future is clear and guided.

Virginia's definition of nursing initially was written as a pamphlet and over the years became the basis for the book, "Basic Principles of Nursing

covery (or to a peaceful death) that they perform unaided when they have the necessary strength, will, or knowledge; nursing also helps individuals carry out prescribed therapy and to be independent of assistance as soon as possible."

It is rather like the "Apostles' Creed" for nursing. The definition speaks to caring, prevention, health promotion, shared care with another clinician, rehabilitation and, generally, the independent practice of nursing. These are all terms with which we are familiar today, thanks in great measure to Virginia Henderson.

Her concepts and views of

individuals sick or well. . . to health. . . or recovery," which would be self-performed if there were ". . . the necessary strength, will, or knowledge. . ." toward independent functioning or to "a peaceful death." Historically, nurses working in the community have had the clinical goal of establishing patient and family independence. For example, a patient with diabetes who is dependent on insulin is expected to learn self-administration and to manage all other aspect of the disease through the assistance of a nurse.

There is confusion in home care today among nurses who know the care that needs to be given but are expected only to provide a service. This leads to a disparity in performance and to a restriction in the clinical judgment the nurse will be allowed to exercise. In home care, we may be tempted to limit our plan of care to a service because it protects us from becoming too involved in the time-consuming responsibility of caring. Virginia Henderson reflected on her own nursing education in as work ". . . where, for the nurse, technical competence, speed of performance, and a 'professional' manner were stressed. . ." (Henderson, 1966, p. 6). The assessment of a patient's or family's ". . . strength, will, or knowledge," as Henderson discovered and described it later continues to be equally worthy of our attention and significantly affects the patient's outcome.

Virginia's professional life focused on nursing's commitment to the patient and the scientific basis for nursing practice. In fact, her work on developing a system of recording observations of the patient have helped

nurses for years and are just as applicable today. Her book, "The Nature of Nursing" (1966) described this tool. Her advisory seems so simple and plain. Basic nursing care involves helping the individual perform the following activities or providing conditions under which the person can perform activities without assistance:

- Breathe normally
- Eat and drink adequately
- Eliminate body wastes
- Move and maintain desirable postures
- Sleep and rest
- Select suitable clothes—dress and undress
- Maintain body temperature within normal range by adjusting clothing and modifying the environment
- Keep the body clean and well-groomed and protect the integument
- Avoid dangers in the environment and avoid injuring others
- Communicate with others in expressing emotions, needs, fears, or opinions
- Worship according to one's faith
- Work in such a way that

there is a sense of accomplishment

- Play or participate in various forms of recreation
- Learn, discover, or satisfy the curiosity that leads to normal development and health, and use of the available health facilities (Henderson, 1966, p. 49).

Clearly, this kind of an assessment transcends mere tasks and focuses, instead, on a holistic approach to nursing practice. When we address the individual's and family's "strength, will, or knowledge," we are appropriately developing a justifiable reimbursable plan of nursing care. We can be grateful that Virginia Henderson said it so well for all of us.

On May 6, 1996, a service of thanksgiving and remembrance for Virginia Henderson was held at Battell Chapel at Yale University in New Haven, CT. A litany was prepared that described the life of Virginia Henderson beautifully. Selections from that litany include:

We give thanks. . .

For her unending devotion to family, friends, and nursing colleagues;

Virginia Henderson reflected on her own nursing education in 1921 as work

"...where, for the nurse, technical competence, speed of performance, and a 'professional' (actually an impersonal) manner were stressed..." (Henderson, 1966, p. 6).

For her ability to make each of us feel that we were a uniquely important part of her life;

For the loving care she gave to her patients as she comforted them, healed them, maintained their health, and saw them to a peaceful death;

For her contributions to nursing nationally and internationally: her research, her textbooks, her definition of nursing, and her belief that the profession be recognized as an art and a science;

For her infinite wisdom, quiet strength, constant love, and courageous compassion;

For her spiritual beliefs and her respect for those of others;

For her ability to bring the world of nursing together through her travels and her love of humanity;

For her ability to inspire us, challenge us, nurture us, and encourage us as we sought her guidance both in personal and professional endeavors. . .

This litany (1996) was followed by singing a 19th century hymn by Frances Ridley Havergal, "On Our Way Rejoicing," the second verse of which best describes this great nursing leader:

If with honest-hearted

Love for God and man,

Day by day thou find us

Doing what we can...

. . . On our way rejoicing as we forward move. . .

The charge and direction is clear. Whether we knew Virginia Henderson or whether we

are familiar with her writings, no matter. . . let us forward move. ■■

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