

no place like home for nurses

By Alicia Schwartz

May 6-12 is National Nurses Week, a time to recognize the role of nurses in society. Like Florence Nightingale, who is the founder of modern nursing, Lillian Wald is the first public health nurse and founder of Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) where I work. A nurse for three decades, I have focused on home care for half my career and find it incredibly rewarding.

When older patients with chronic illnesses leave the hospital, they are often confused and unable to recall their doctors' instructions. In homecare, we remind patients and educate them about their bodies and how they are changing and aging. I worked in a hospital emergency room for several years where my job was to help "fix" someone in the moment. I always wondered what happened after the patients returned home where the real healing begins, and now I know. When we coordinate care for people in their homes, we see how they socialize and learn about the world they live in. It's not just the illness, it's their environment too. One woman who doesn't have family to support her can't get out to go to church. We reached out to her friends and now they call her from church every Sunday, so that she can hear the sermon over the phone. It's made a huge difference for her.

One of the biggest challenges our patients face is learning about their condition and understanding how they can improve. That may seem simple, but it's really not. For example, patients may know that hypertension is associated with high blood pressure risks, but often don't understand why certain lifestyle changes are important. They have a hard time accepting the need to modify how they eat, drink, or move around. If their bodies have served them well for decades, why should things change now? There's a lot of reminding and repeating information, which is understandable. One woman has been managing her diabetes successfully for nearly 30 years, but I needed to teach her the importance of changing her injection location. She'd been giving herself insulin shots in the abdomen for years and was now experiencing some complications. She was afraid to try another spot, so we worked together until she understood the benefit of rotating the injections to her thigh or arm. What a difference it made for her.

Nursing is all about connection. Once a doctor asked if I could help translate for his Latino patient.

Afterwards the doctor said to me, "There was an aura around you when you were talking to that man, the connection was beautiful. I wish that could be taught." I believe it can. Like Florence Nightingale and Lillian Wald, we all have that aura. It requires a desire to truly connect with those we care for.



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