# In Memoriam

## My Florence Nightingale

**Section Editor:** Marilyn Rice, RN, BSN, MPA, CEN, CNAA

**Author:** Deborah Moore, RN, BSN, Underhill Center, Vermont

This past year I received the Nursing Excellence Award from my ED peers. In the dedication ceremony, I spoke about what the award meant to me and how I owed it all to my mother, the finest nurse I ever had known—the "Florence Nightingale" of my life.

There was never any doubt about my career direction from the time I was a little girl. I remember once as a child being transported to the local emergency department when I fell on the ice while skating, striking my head and losing consciousness. When I came around I saw the most beautiful sight—my Mom looking down on me. She was on duty at the hospital that day. How angelic she looked in her starched white uniform and cap. With a simple stroke of her hand on my forehead, I was all better. Her wonderful ability to make everything all better was the example I lived with all my growing years.

"Let's run away to the circus together," she said, nudging me in the side. I marveled at this impish suggestion coming from my mother. In the midst of the circus excitement, I stole a long look at her. Her dazzling smile, twinkling eyes, and buttery-soft hands clasped together like a gleeful child were my magic for the evening. My hospital had sponsored the circus performance and I bought tickets for my husband and two teenage sons who had opted not to go at the last minute. My parents were thrilled when I invited them along, especially my Mom. After the show I dropped them off at their house and my Mom bent over the passenger seat and gave me a kiss. "Thank you so much for taking me to the circus. I love you—and drive carefully." "I love you, Mom. I'll take a rain check on our 'run-away to the circus' adventure." She turned and waved and flashed me that lovely smile.

At nine o'clock the next morning the phone rang. It was my sister-in-law who lived across the street from my parents. She was breathless and almost hysterical. I heard her say, "Deb, it's your Mom—she fell in the basement and she's not responding to us!" After making sure rescue was on the way, I yelled the basic facts to my husband, threw on some clothes, and made the 40-minute trip to the emergency department in 20 minutes, all the way playing out scenarios. The one I focused on was arriving in the department and finding her in one of our minor care rooms, sitting up on the stretcher holding an ice bag to her head. I would come in and joke with her about doing circus acrobatics and then take her home with head bump instructions in her hand.

Mary C. Ploof, RN (1925-1994)

When I came through the front doors I was met by the admitting clerk who said, "Your family is in the family room, Deb." Why, I thought to myself? Maybe it's because there are too many of them for the waiting room. (I do have nine brothers and sisters and a huge extended family.) I saw my frightened Dad and brother and told them I would check on Mom and update them. I quickly scanned the patient board for my Mom's name. At the same time I saw her name listed

Ms. Moore is staff nurse, Emergency Department, Fletcher Allen Health Care, Medical Center, Campus, Burlington, Vermont.

For reprints, write Deborah Moore, RN, BSN, P.O. Box 131, Underhill Center, VT 05490.

J EMERG NURS 1995;21:477-8



0099-1767/95 $5.00 + 0 **18/65/66861**

in the main trauma room, I was standing directly in front of that room. Looking in, my senses flooded. Through the crowd I saw her beautiful hand in decerebrate posturing, I heard her fighting the ventilator, I smelled the mix of blood and her hairspray, and I felt my heart beating out of my chest. As I rushed into the room, the crowd parted. I took her hand, saw the blood pressure readout—183/111 mm Hg—and I felt a hand on my shoulder.

This couldn't be happening to her; it couldn't be happening to me. Every day I dealt with situations like these, consoled families, held their hands, wiped their tears—somehow feeling insulated from it ever happening to me. You go home after an evening's work and you *do* count your blessings. You hug your children and tell them how much you love them. You make every day count, because you know how fragile life is. Still, there is a strong denial that you are somehow not part of that world of sorrow. "Your mother had a bad fall. We are not quite sure why, but right now we are ready for a computed tomographic (CT) scan of her head." At that point I realized that 20 people were in the room, all working to help my Mom, either directly or indirectly—and supporting me, too. I had worked with most of them for many years. Mom's main nurse asked what she could do for me. It was Cheryl, who had a strong background in neurosurgery and was giving her all to Mom. "Just let me stay with her," I said, "I don't want to leave her."

**As I rushed into the room, the crowd parted. I took her hand, saw the blood pressure readout—183/111 mm Hg—and I felt a hand on my shoulder.**

I quickly ran and told my family that we were going for the CT scan and I would tell them more when I knew it. At times I was blinded with role confusion: nurse-daughter? daughter-nurse?

I even insisted on giving her the tetanus shot one nurse was about to give. After that bit of nonsense, I quickly realized why I was there—to support my mother, hold her hand, tell her I was by her side and how very much I loved her. The seriousness of her situation came to light yet again when I realized on the way to the CT scan that the stretcher was moving very fast, flanked by five people. I turned to our surgical resident, grabbed his arm and said, "Please help her—she's my life." "I know. I know, Deb—we're doing everything."

The CT scan came up, cross section by cross section. I saw the bleeding, the shift, and the near whiteout of her brain. It was the worst I had ever seen. Still in denial and still holding on to hope, I told the neurosurgeon, a friend and coworker for 8 years, "Marty, do what you need to." The intracranial pressure (ICP) monitor was started while I held her hand, opening pressure—53 mm Hg. Marty said, "We'll move her to intensive care and take things an hour at a time." Her blood dripped on my sandaled foot and her hand never squeezed mine back. I picked up the cutting of her hair and pocketed it as I walked to the family room, hugged my Dad and wept. My eyes had been flooded with tears since I first saw her in the emergency department. My family streamed into the room before we moved her upstairs. The transfer was done quickly and efficiently. She COULDN'T die here in this department, not MY department. I knew that was everyone's concern.

Within moments of the actual transfer, Mom's blood pressure dropped and the ICP increased. The hand was on my shoulder again—"We are now taking things minute by minute, Deb." Despite tremendous resuscitative efforts, my mother was dying. I asked that all the tubes be removed and for my family to be brought into the room. Many more relatives had gathered in the 2½ hours she had been there. Now the only monitor was a cardiac monitor. The ICP switch was removed and Mom's head was carefully dressed. I gently washed her face and talked quietly to her before my family returned to the room. We stood around her bed, hearing the faint beep of the monitor, the quiet prayers of the priest, and her agonal breathing. I felt the blood being gently washed off my foot by Mom's doctor; I almost wished he hadn't, because that was a part of her.

My head rested against hers for the final moments of her life and with my arm I could feel her heart beating—and stop beating. My Dad had draped his body across hers, and my brothers and sisters each held onto a part of her. Including the various staff in the room, a dry eye was not to be found.

The worst had happened. But I had learned a lot about myself that day. I learned that I could carry on; I was not disaster-proof but I could bring some good back from all of this. I came away from the experience with an even keener sense of what caring is all about. It has been a year since her death and the grief remains. I hold her inside my heart and try to deal with life with the openness and forgiving nature that she taught me. She truly was my Florence Nightingale.