

Review Article

Nurses today – is this the dream of Florence Nightingale

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ABSTRACT

Florence Nightingale's enduring influence on contemporary nursing practice through a comprehensive analysis of her seminal work is "Notes on Nursing: What It Is, and What It Is Not" (1859). The study explores whether modern nursing fulfills Nightingale's original vision by comparing the foundational attributes she identified with the competencies required of today's nurses. Nightingale's core principles emphasized keen observation skills, common sense judgment, meticulous attention to cleanliness and hygiene, quiet demeanor, punctuality, organizational management, and genuine empathy for patients. These qualities, articulated over 160 years ago, remain remarkably relevant in contemporary healthcare settings.

This review presents a detailed comparative analysis contrasting Nightingale's era with modern nursing across multiple dimensions including compassion and care, clinical skills, leadership, evidence-based practice, education, advocacy, work ethic, innovation, communication, courage, cultural awareness, and adaptability. Through eighteen clinical scenarios, the analysis demonstrates how Nightingale's principles translate into today's complex healthcare environments, from Intensive care and infection control to crisis management and end-of-life support. While technological capabilities and clinical interventions have advanced dramatically, the fundamental commitment to patient-centered care, environmental management, systematic observation, data-driven practice, and patient advocacy remains unchanged.

The review concludes that Nightingale's vision of nursing as both an art requiring personal qualities and a science demanding systematic knowledge continues to shape excellence in contemporary nursing practice. Her legacy transcends historical significance, actively informing professional standards, educational requirements, infection control protocols, and the ethical foundation of modern nursing, proving that her pioneering principles remain vital to quality patient care in the 21st century.

Keywords: Nurse, Florence Nightingale, Today nurses, Qualities

INTRODUCTION

A nurse should be clean, sober, honest, truthful, trustworthy, punctual, quiet and orderly.

Nursing requires a combination of medical knowledge, technical skills, and compassion. Nurses work closely with doctors and other healthcare providers as part of a care team, often serving as the primary point of contact for patients. They play a crucial role in health education,

helping patients understand their conditions and manage their care. Nurses are trained to assess patients' health, administer medications and treatments, monitor vital signs, dress wounds, and provide emotional support to patients and their families.¹

Attributes of nurses according to Florence Nightingale

Observation is one of the most fundamental qualities of a nurse. Florence Nightingale emphasized that nurses must

be trained not merely to look at patients, but to observe carefully, systematically, and purposefully. A competent nurse should recognize subtle changes in a patient's physical, emotional, and behavioral condition and understand which findings indicate improvement or deterioration. Effective observation includes monitoring vital signs, changes in consciousness, appetite, sleep, pain, skin condition, elimination, mobility, mood, and responses to treatment. Good observation also helps nurses identify problems early and communicate important findings promptly to the healthcare team. In contemporary nursing, observation has become even more significant with the use of electronic monitoring, clinical assessment tools, and evidence-based practice. However, technology should complement rather than replace the nurse's clinical judgment and direct observation. A professional nurse therefore develops attentive eyes, a listening ear, and a questioning mind.²

Nightingale considered fresh air and ventilation essential components of nursing care. She believed that the environment surrounding a patient directly influences recovery and emphasized maintaining clean, fresh air without exposing the patient to unnecessary cold. Her environmental principle remains relevant in modern healthcare, where infection prevention, indoor air quality, adequate ventilation, temperature control, and environmental safety are important components of patient care. Nurses have an important role in ensuring that patient areas are clean, adequately ventilated, comfortable, and safe. In addition, contemporary nurses must understand the importance of infection-control practices, respiratory hygiene, appropriate isolation procedures, and environmental cleanliness. Thus, Nightingale's emphasis on fresh air can be understood today as part of a broader responsibility to create a healthy therapeutic environment that supports healing and prevents avoidable complications.³

Nursing requires more than theoretical knowledge; it demands practical wisdom, common sense, and sound judgment. Nightingale recognized that many nursing situations require nurses to make sensible decisions based on careful assessment of the patient's needs and circumstances. A nurse may encounter situations in which there is no single predetermined solution, requiring the ability to prioritize, adapt, and respond appropriately. Modern nurses similarly use clinical reasoning to determine which patient needs immediate attention, when a change in condition requires escalation, and how care should be individualized. Common sense in nursing also involves anticipating possible problems, using available resources responsibly, and avoiding unnecessary actions that may cause discomfort or risk. A professional nurse therefore combines knowledge, experience, critical thinking, and practical judgment to provide safe and effective care.⁴

Nightingale regarded unnecessary noise as disturbing to sick patients and emphasized the importance of calmness

and appropriate movement around the patient. She also distinguished gentleness from slowness, recognizing that nursing care can be both efficient and compassionate. In modern healthcare environments, nurses must maintain a balance between timely clinical care and the patient's need for rest, privacy, and psychological comfort. Unnecessary conversations, loud equipment, careless movement, and avoidable interruptions can interfere with sleep and recovery. At the same time, nursing should not become excessively slow in the name of being gentle. Professional nursing requires efficient, confident, coordinated, and compassionate actions. A nurse's manner, voice, movement, and communication should contribute to a peaceful therapeutic environment while ensuring that essential care is delivered promptly.⁵

Punctuality is an essential professional responsibility in nursing because patient care frequently depends upon accurate timing. Nightingale illustrated how even a small delay in providing food could significantly affect a weak patient's ability to receive nourishment. Today, timing remains important in medication administration, monitoring, nutrition, treatment procedures, investigations, postoperative care, and scheduled clinical interventions. Delays can sometimes compromise patient safety and treatment outcomes. Punctuality also communicates reliability and respect for the patient. A professional nurse therefore needs to organize responsibilities, prioritize tasks, manage time effectively, and anticipate the needs of patients rather than simply responding after problems occur. Being on time in nursing is not merely a matter of discipline; it is an aspect of patient safety and professional accountability.⁶

Nightingale recognized that good nursing cannot depend solely on the physical presence of a nurse. Care must be organized in such a way that appropriate practices continue even when the nurse is not immediately present. This principle highlights the importance of management, delegation, documentation, communication, coordination, and continuity of care. Contemporary nurses work within complex healthcare systems and may coordinate with doctors, allied health professionals, nursing assistants, patients, families, and administrators. They must prioritize multiple responsibilities while ensuring that essential care is not overlooked. Effective organizational skills enable nurses to manage workload, maintain accurate records, prepare equipment, coordinate procedures, and ensure continuity between shifts. A professional nurse is therefore not only a caregiver but also a manager, coordinator, communicator, and leader who helps the entire care process function effectively.⁷

Cleanliness was central to Nightingale's philosophy of nursing. She recognized that poor environmental and personal hygiene could undermine other aspects of patient care. This principle has evolved into today's comprehensive practices of infection prevention and control. Nurses play a major role in maintaining personal hygiene, environmental cleanliness, hand hygiene, aseptic

technique, appropriate waste disposal, linen management, and prevention of healthcare-associated infections. Clean surroundings also promote dignity, comfort, and psychological well-being. Nurses must understand that hygiene is not simply a routine task but a scientifically important component of patient safety. In today's healthcare environment, the Nightingale principle of cleanliness therefore continues through infection-control standards, evidence-based hygiene practices, environmental safety, and prevention of avoidable infections.⁸

Nightingale placed considerable emphasis on preventing unnecessary suffering and believed that poor nursing could contribute to patient discomfort and complications. This reflects the nurse's responsibility to anticipate needs rather than waiting until a patient experiences distress. Modern nursing similarly emphasizes preventive care, early identification of complications, pain assessment and management, pressure injury prevention, fall prevention, nutritional support, emotional support, and individualized comfort measures. Thoughtfulness means paying attention to small details that may have a significant impact on a patient's experience. It includes asking whether the patient is comfortable, whether pain is adequately controlled, whether assistance is required, and whether the patient understands what is happening. A compassionate professional nurse therefore asks not only "What treatment does this patient need?" but also "What can I do to prevent unnecessary suffering?"⁴

Nightingale emphasized the importance of clear, concise, and decisive communication with sick patients. Patients may already feel frightened, uncertain, or vulnerable because of illness, and ambiguous communication can increase anxiety. Nurses therefore need to communicate information in a manner that is understandable, confident, respectful, and appropriate to the patient's level of comprehension. Decisiveness does not mean being authoritarian; rather, it means being able to respond appropriately when action is required. In contemporary nursing, effective communication is essential during emergencies, handovers, patient education, informed decision-making, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Nurses should communicate relevant information accurately without unnecessary confusion while also recognizing when they need to seek assistance. Thus, clarity, confidence, and appropriate assertiveness are important characteristics of professional nursing practice.⁹

Continuous observation and vigilance are essential because a patient's condition can change rapidly, particularly among critically ill, elderly, postoperative, or highly vulnerable patients. Nightingale emphasized the

need for nurses to maintain careful watchfulness and protect patients from preventable complications. Modern nursing requires continuous assessment of physical and psychological status, monitoring of vital signs, recognition of early warning signs, evaluation of treatment responses, and timely escalation of concerns. Vigilance also includes observing the environment for potential risks such as falls, medication errors, infection hazards, and equipment problems. A nurse should never assume that a patient's condition will remain stable simply because it was stable earlier. Vigilance transforms observation into action and allows nurses to identify deterioration before it becomes an emergency.⁴

Nightingale challenged the narrow understanding of nursing as merely administering medicines or performing procedures. She described nursing as creating conditions that allow the body to heal through appropriate attention to air, light, warmth, cleanliness, quiet, and nutrition. This broader understanding is highly relevant to contemporary nursing, which encompasses physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of care. Modern professional nursing combines scientific knowledge with compassionate practice, health education, disease prevention, rehabilitation, advocacy, communication, and patient-centered care. A nurse must understand not only what to do but why it should be done. Professional competence therefore requires continuous learning, evidence-based practice, ethical awareness, and the ability to integrate scientific knowledge with individualized patient care.

Nightingale encouraged nurses to educate themselves rather than depend entirely on instructions from others. This reflects the importance of curiosity, independent thinking, reflection, and lifelong learning in nursing. Healthcare is continuously changing through advances in technology, treatment, research, pharmacology, public health, and nursing science. Therefore, nurses cannot rely only on knowledge acquired during their initial education. They must continually update their knowledge, critically evaluate evidence, participate in professional development, and reflect on their own practice. The modern professional nurse is a lifelong learner who is willing to question outdated practices, acquire new competencies, and adapt to changing healthcare needs. Learning should ultimately translate into safer, more effective, and more compassionate patient care.¹⁰

Both Nightingale and modern nurses combine scientific knowledge, technical skill, and genuine human caring to heal patients and improve healthcare systems. The fundamental commitment to relieving suffering through skilled, compassionate care remains unchanged despite vastly different clinical capabilities.

Table 1: A comparison of past and present-day nurses' traits.

Qualities	Florence nightingale	Today's Nurses
Compassion & care	Deep empathy for wounded soldiers; treated patients with dignity when many saw them as expendable	Patient-centered care that addresses physical and emotional needs; support for patients and families during vulnerable times
Clinical skills	Focus on observation, hygiene, nutrition, and basic wound care; pioneered systematic patient monitoring	Advanced technical competencies including complex medications, medical technologies, diagnostics, and specialized treatments
Leadership	Reformed entire hospital systems; managed teams of nurses; challenged military and medical establishment	Lead interdisciplinary teams; coordinate care across departments; mentor new nurses and students
Data & evidence	Revolutionary use of statistics and data visualization (polar area diagrams) to prove sanitary reforms saved lives	Evidence-based practice using current research; quality metrics; electronic health records and data analysis
Education & learning	Self-educated in mathematics and healthcare; established first secular nursing school; wrote extensively on nursing practice	Continuous professional development; specialty certifications; bachelor's and advanced degrees increasingly standard
Advocacy	Championed public health reform, sanitation improvements, and healthcare access; influenced policy at highest levels	Patient advocacy within healthcare systems; involvement in healthcare policy; addressing health disparities and social determinants of health
Work ethic	Worked exhaustively, often to physical collapse; night rounds with her lamp; relentless dedication to patients	Long shifts with high patient loads; commitment despite staffing shortages; physical and emotional demands of 24/7 care
Innovation	Transformed nursing into respectable profession; revolutionized hospital design; introduced systematic hygiene practices	Adopt new technologies; implement telehealth; participate in quality improvement initiatives; develop new care protocols
Communication	Wrote detailed reports and letters; communicated with government officials; documented patient conditions meticulously	Bridge between patients, families, and medical team; translate complex information; electronic documentation; interdisciplinary collaboration
Courage	Defied Victorian social norms; traveled to war zones; stood firm against opposition from authorities	Handle emergencies and trauma; work during pandemics and crises; speak up for patient safety despite hierarchical pressures
Cultural awareness	Worked across British class divisions; though limited by Victorian-era perspectives, focused on universal human dignity	Provide culturally competent care to diverse populations; address language barriers; understand varied health beliefs and practices
Adaptability	Improvised in primitive war hospitals with scarce resources; implemented reforms in resistant institutions	Adjust to rapidly changing patient conditions, technologies, and protocols; work across different care settings and specialties

Table 2: Clinical scenario from yester years towards modern days.

Clinical scenario	Florece Nightingale	Today's Nurses
Compassion & care	Personally attended to soldiers' emotional needs; wrote letters home for wounded men; held hands of dying patients during night rounds	ICU nurse sits with dying COVID patient via video call so isolated family can say goodbye; pediatric nurse uses play therapy to comfort frightened child before surgery
Clinical assessment	Documented precise observations of wounds, fever patterns, and patient deterioration; recognized correlation between sanitation and infection rates	ED nurse identifies subtle signs of sepsis through vital sign trends and mental status changes; oncology nurse detects early chemotherapy complications through systematic assessment
Hygiene & infection control	Implemented hand washing, clean linens, proper ventilation, and waste disposal at Scutari; reduced mortality from 42% to 2% through sanitary reforms	OR nurse performs surgical scrub protocol and maintains sterile field; infection control nurse implements isolation precautions for MRSA patient and educates staff on PPE
Pain management	Positioned patients for comfort; ensured adequate rest and quiet; provided emotional comfort when medications were limited	Palliative care nurse uses multimodal pain management including medications, positioning, music therapy, and family presence for cancer patient
Nutrition care	Established kitchen to provide nourishing	Cardiac nurse educates heart failure patient on low-

Continued.

Clinical scenario	Florence Nightingale	Today's Nurses
	food; recognized that proper nutrition aided recovery; prepared special diets for sick soldiers	sodium diet; ICU nurse adjusts tube feeding rates based on residual volumes and tolerance
Data & evidence	Created "coxcomb" diagrams showing preventable deaths from poor sanitation; used statistics to convince Parliament to fund reforms	Diabetes educator tracks patient's A1C levels and adjusts insulin protocol; quality improvement nurse analyzes fall data to implement prevention bundle
Patient education	Taught basic hygiene to patients and families; trained nurses in systematic observation and care techniques	Discharge nurse teaches post-surgical wound care and medication management; cardiac rehab nurse demonstrates proper use of nitroglycerin for angina
Crisis management	Organized chaotic military hospitals with limited supplies; triaged hundreds of casualties; worked through cholera and typhus outbreaks	Trauma nurse coordinates multiple gunshot victims in mass casualty event; charge nurse manages staffing crisis during influenza surge
Medication administration	Carefully measured and administered available medications like laudanum and quinine; documented effects and side effects	Med-surg nurse performs five rights of medication administration, scans barcodes, monitors for adverse reactions, and educates patient about new prescriptions
Advocacy	Challenged military doctors who neglected soldiers; demanded better supplies and conditions; wrote to officials about systemic problems	Oncology nurse advocates for pain medication increase when patient is suffering; school nurse connects homeless student's family with community resources
Wound care	Cleaned and dressed battle wounds; changed bandages regularly; removed debris and dead tissue when possible	Wound care nurse performs negative pressure therapy on diabetic foot ulcer; burn unit nurse performs debridement and applies specialized dressings
Environmental management	Ensured fresh air, natural light, reduced noise, proper temperature; designed hospitals with ventilation and sanitation in mind	NICU nurse maintains isolette temperature and humidity for premature infant; psychiatric nurse creates calm therapeutic environment to de-escalate agitated patient
Teamwork	Coordinated with military surgeons, supply officers, and her team of nurses; managed conflicts between medical staff	Critical care nurse collaborates with respiratory therapist, pharmacist, and physician during rapid response; OR team performs surgical time-out before procedure
Technology use	Innovated with statistical charts and systematic record-keeping systems; designed hospital layouts for efficiency	Telemetry nurse monitors cardiac rhythms on central station and responds to arrhythmia alarms; infusion nurse programs smart pump for precise medication dosing
Mental health support	Recognized "irritable heart" (PTSD) in soldiers; provided emotional support and calm presence to traumatized men	Psychiatric nurse uses de-escalation techniques with suicidal patient; PACU nurse provides reassurance to anxious patient emerging from anesthesia
End-of-Life Care	Provided comfort and dignity to dying soldiers; ensured they weren't alone; facilitated final letters to loved ones	Hospice nurse manages symptom control for terminal patient at home; oncology nurse supports family during withdrawal of life support in ICU
Continuous monitoring	Made night rounds with lamp to check each patient personally; maintained vigilant observation of patient conditions	Stepdown unit nurse monitors post-operative patient hourly for bleeding and vital sign changes; labor and delivery nurse continuously assesses fetal heart tones
Emergency response	Responded to influx of Battle of Inkerman casualties; organized triage and immediate care with limited resources	Code blue team nurse performs CPR and administers emergency medications during cardiac arrest; flight nurse stabilizes trauma patient during helicopter transport

The dream of Florence Nightingale on today's nurse qualities

Florence Nightingale established nursing as a profession founded on observation, discipline, compassion, cleanliness, and scientific thinking. Although healthcare has changed considerably, many of the qualities she

emphasized remain essential for the professional nurse of today and tomorrow.

Florence Nightingale stated keen observation skills. A nurse must develop the ability to observe carefully and recognize subtle changes in a patient's physical, emotional, and mental condition. Observation of

breathing, appetite, skin colour, pain, behaviour, and consciousness help nurses identify deterioration early and provide timely care.

Florence Nightingale stated common sense and sound judgment. Nursing requires practical intelligence and clinical reasoning. Nurses must interpret observations, assess priorities, and make safe decisions according to individual patient needs rather than simply following routines mechanically.

Florence Nightingale stated attention to cleanliness. Cleanliness remains fundamental to safe nursing care. Nurses must maintain personal hygiene, patient cleanliness, clean bedding, equipment, and surroundings while following infection-prevention practices to reduce avoidable infections and promote recovery.

Florence Nightingale stated quiet and calm demeanor. A peaceful environment supports healing. Nurses should avoid unnecessary noise, communicate calmly, and provide care gently and efficiently. A composed nurse can also reduce patient anxiety and create a sense of safety.

Florence Nightingale stated attention to detail. Small details can have significant effects on patient outcomes. Appropriate positioning, ventilation, nutrition, comfort, medication administration, documentation, and monitoring require careful attention. Professional nursing is often reflected in these seemingly minor but important actions.

Florence Nightingale stated reliability and punctuality. Nurses must be dependable and complete responsibilities at the appropriate time. Timely medication administration, treatment, assessment, documentation, and communication are essential for patient safety and continuity of care.

Florence Nightingale stated patience and perseverance. Caring for patients often requires sustained effort, particularly when recovery is prolonged or progress is slow. Patience enables nurses to provide consistent support, while perseverance helps them remain committed during challenging circumstances.

Florence Nightingale stated discretion and confidentiality. Nurses have access to sensitive personal and health information. Respecting privacy, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding inappropriate discussion of patient information are essential components of ethical professional practice.

Florence Nightingale stated empathy and genuine Care. Nursing should never become merely a mechanical performance of procedures. Empathy allows nurses to understand patients' fears, discomfort, preferences, and concerns. Compassionate care promotes trust, dignity, and emotional well-being.

Florence Nightingale stated self-discipline and self-control. Nurses must manage their emotions, stress, and personal concerns while remaining focused on patient care. Professional self-control supports sound judgment, effective communication, and safe practice, particularly during emergencies and stressful situations.¹¹

Florence Nightingale stated continuous learning and thinking. Nightingale encouraged nurses to think about what they were doing and why they were doing it. Modern nurses must continue learning, engage with evidence-based practice, develop new competencies, and reflect on their professional performance.

Florence Nightingale stated resourcefulness and adaptability: Nurses must respond effectively to changing patient conditions, unexpected situations, limited resources, and advances in healthcare. Adaptability enables individualized care while maintaining safety and professional standards.

Florence Nightingale stated honesty and respect for the patient. Accurate communication, truthful documentation, and reporting of important clinical information are essential for patient safety. At the same time, every patient must be treated with dignity, privacy, individuality, and respect for their values and preferences.

Florence Nightingale stated ability to prioritize and manage the environment. Nurses must distinguish urgent needs from routine tasks and organize care efficiently. They also have an important role in maintaining appropriate ventilation, lighting, warmth, cleanliness, quietness, comfort, and safety within the care environment.

The professional nurse is not merely a provider of procedures but a caregiver, observer, communicator, critical thinker, educator, advocate, and lifelong learner. Nightingale's principles remind nurses that quality care requires both scientific competence and genuine humanity. By strengthening observation, judgment, compassion, discipline, adaptability, ethical practice, and continuous learning, nurses can carry forward Nightingale's legacy and become competent, compassionate, and resilient professionals prepared to meet the healthcare needs of today and tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

Florence Nightingale's pioneering vision continues to shape modern nursing in profound ways. Her emphasis on compassionate, patient-centered care remains the heart of nursing practice, reminding today's nurses to treat each patient with dignity and kindness while addressing their holistic needs. Her revolutionary focus on sanitation and hygiene has evolved into rigorous infection control protocols that save countless lives daily. Nightingale's insistence on keen observation and meticulous documentation translates seamlessly into contemporary

nursing assessment and electronic health records. Her commitment to evidence-based practice, using data and statistics to improve outcomes, now manifests in nurses who apply research findings and participate in quality improvement initiatives. The professional standards and formal education she championed have become cornerstones of nursing licensure and continuing education requirements. Her understanding that the healing environment matters inform modern approaches to patient safety and comfort. Perhaps most enduringly, her role as an advocate for patients and healthcare reform lives on in nurses who speak up for patient rights, safety, and equitable care. While healthcare technology and treatments have advanced dramatically since Nightingale's era, these foundational qualities she established compassion, cleanliness, careful observation, continuous learning, and advocacy remain as vital today as they were in the 19th century, proving that her legacy is not merely historical but actively shapes excellence in contemporary nursing practice. Nightingale's vision was of nursing as both an art requiring personal qualities and a science requiring systematic knowledge and qualities that remain fundamental to nursing practice today. Nurses today are encouraged to look beyond procedures and technology and reflect on the person behind the illness. The professional nurse of tomorrow will need to combine Nightingale's timeless values with scientific knowledge, technological competence, emotional intelligence, leadership, ethical practice, cultural sensitivity, and holistic care.

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