

Salute to our Medical Staff

**By Admiral (Retired) Ravindra C Wijegunaratne
Former Chief of Defence Staff**

My late mother was a nurse. She was very beautiful and strong. She had 41 years government service and reached pinnacle of her profession before retirement and went abroad. Then she worked in Norway and Saudi Arabia for few years. She returned home when we lost our elder sister due to an accident in Russia. Then for next 20 years she worked in private hospitals in Sri Lanka (Nawaloka, Asiri, Central, Delmon in Colombo and Philips at Kalutara). Her last assignment was to train young nurses in Philips hospital in Kalutara, closer to our home in Matugama. She stopped working at age of 80 years, that was also with much reluctance. She passed away at age of 83 years. More than earnings, work and teaching young nurses was her passion. She loved her profession and highly respected by her student nurses.

She was very proud of her profession. I would say, she is a true student of Florence Nightingale. She looked after patients day and night with utmost dedication.

She used to narrate how she was recruited into Nursing service by New Zealand and Belgium sisters in 1950s when she was just 19 years old. Those days she says, trainee nurses had to go through tough training under watchful eye of these foreign sisters who always expected very high standards. Her expertise was in labour room. She used to boast, "you have to be very strong and caring to be at labour room. That's why I was selected for that job by New Zealand sisters" . She served in government maternity hospitals in De Soya and Castle street for very long time of her career.

I can vividly recollect how she returned home with tired eyes after night shifts when we were about to go to school. By the time we returned home after school she had prepared our lunch and was waiting for us to come home. When I recollect those days, now I realize that she must have slept less than five hours, that is also during day time. She was not neglecting her responsibilities as mother because of her chosen profession.

In late 1960s when my late father became Private Secretary to then Justice Minister and head of Senate, Hon Fairly Wijemanna, he wanted my mother to take early retirement. As a child of 5 years old I can remember very well that my mother was very angry and vehemently refused that suggestion by my father. That was the last time my father discussed about her early retirement.

We were lucky that we had two dedicated servants at home, Asilin and Piyasena. Asilin cooked and Piyasena took us to school. My father sacrificed some of his "happy outings" with his friends to be at home with us whenever mother was on night duty. My mother was very proud of her profession and her dedication and commitment to patients were unbelievable.

Time to time, she used to recollect working in labour room at Castle Street Maternity hospital which was very tough. She said, sometimes, three or four deliveries in one shift. She said, “ how wonderful to bring new life to this World. I am blessed with this job”. She had a complete record of babies she had helped in delivery in her diary. Amazing !

She had one regret. When she took over her night shift in mid 1960s, the nursing staff in previous shift has said they had a stillbirth, a baby boy who was pronounced dead on delivery by doctors and laying in labour room sink and soon mortuary staff to come to take the body. My mother had took the baby who was pronounced dead up by his legs and given a hard tap on his back. Like a miracle, baby start coughing. Pandemonium erupted in the labour room and child was immediately transfer to Intensive care Unit. She says, she could not record this baby’s name in her diary. She use to say “ this lucky baby must be still living and he should be around your (my) age”. What a story!

When I was Commander of the Navy, she broke her hip borne. Navy Orthopedic Surgeon Dr Wijedasa, wants to treat her in our Navy hospital Walisara. I feel that was the happiest time she spent before her demise after one year. Her hip replacement was successful but she doesn’t want to get discharged from Navy hospital and go home. She was very popular with our doctors and nurses. She was loved by our trainee nurses. My mother will recollect some incident happened during her very long and precious Nursing career and teach them. I know she was a very good teacher. When she was leaving Navy hospital, there were tears in eyes of trainee nurses. She was a graceful lady who leaves an loving impression with whomever she met. I think she inherited this quality from her job. No need to say, she was very proud of me.

She never count money she earned in Government Nursing Career. When she compared what earned abroad/ private hospitals and government service, it was “peanuts “. She never complained what she got, but preached what Florence Nightingale has thought. She says “ We were Angles for sick carrying our lamp at darkest night and ensure they recover fast”. This is exactly what British PM Boris Johnson said after leaving hospital last week. He paid tribute to two nurses (Jenny from New Zealand and Louis from Portugal) at his bed side during the night he was in ICU taking Oxygen. In his own words, “When things would have gone either way”.

More than a tribute to my mother, this write up is for all our nurses, sisters, Matrons and medical staff we see on TV working tirelessly with dedication and commitment during this difficult time of our country. Your great effort will help us to overcome Covid -19 pandemic and to keep the death rate low.

I know how much you earn in government service as your pay and allowances. I know difficulties and tiredness of night shifts. I know you do not afford to have “Asilin and Piyasena” at home with what you earn. I know how much sacrifice your husband has to undergo due to your profession. I know how much your children miss you.

Do not worry; you are the true disciples of Florence Nightingale. Nation highly appreciate your work day in day out.

I see my mother in all your eyes and faces. Your children will one day write and speak of your commitment. Like what I am doing for my mother.

I SALUTE YOU!

New Zealand and Belgium Nursing Sisters in Ceylon 1950s

