

Nurses Week Takes New Meaning in Age of COVID

World's most famous nurse, Florence Nightingale, born 200 years ago

The annual Nurses Week in early May was supposed to be special this year as the nurses at Pen Bay Medical Center (PBMC) and Waldo County General Hospital (WCGH) were set to join their colleagues around the world in celebrating the 200th birthday of Florence Nightingale.

COVID-19 changed all that. And yet the nurses at PBMC and WCGH remain upbeat about what is likely to be the most challenging time in their careers. What stands out is the humility with which they approach their work – a trait that Florence Nightingale would have approved. While the rest of the world celebrates nurses as heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic, those at PBMC and WCGH say they are just doing what they signed up for – caring for the sick, comforting the dying and supporting those grieving the loss of a loved one.

“Our nurses are a reminder that courage isn’t always as dramatic as what we see in the movies,” said Ellen Leone, interim chief nursing officer at PBMC and WCGH. “Sometimes courage is just showing up to work.”

“Nursing is a calling,” Leone said. “Our nurses at PBMC and WCGH – like nurses everywhere – were born to face this challenge. They are showing us all how to navigate this pandemic with their daily displays of professionalism, dedication and grace, and I am so proud of them all.”

These days, of course, showing up to work often means something different than it did several months ago. As part of the hospitals’ response to COVID-19, many nurses have taken on expanded duties. Others have taken on new roles as the hospitals reassign team members to where they are needed most.

For example, Amy Krawic, one of two assistant nurse managers in the medical-surgical unit (MSU) at PBMC before COVID-19, was reassigned to help set up and then serve as charge nurse in the new COVID-19 wing of the hospital.

Krawic said she approached her new role by reminding herself to be flexible. “I was already training people reassigned to MSU from doctor’s offices. I was asking them to be flexible, and now it was my turn.”

She had to call on the flexibility frequently while setting up the COVID-19 Unit. “Especially early on, we didn’t know a lot about this coronavirus because it was new. So we would test a new procedure for the COVID unit and sometimes it didn’t work out. Reminding myself to be flexible is what got me through that. My motto became: ‘This is just a bump along the way.’”



Above, Kaitlyn Richard, RN, places an oxygen mask on a mannequin during a training drill at PBMC. Even as many people shelter at home, nurses at PBMC and WCGH have come to work each day to care for our community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We’ll figure it out.”

Nicole Kenney, RN, the director of the acute and critical care nurses at WCGH, found herself in a similar situation.

“My role expanded,” said Kenney. “A lot of what I do now is work with our nursing team to develop new workflows around caring for COVID-19 patients while keeping our non-COVID patients and ourselves healthy and safe.”

“In terms of the tasks that we do on a daily basis, this isn’t normal nursing,” Kenney said. “It’s more battlefield nursing. We’ve had to create new ways of doing things to protect ourselves and our patients from the virus.”

“For example, we wear surgical masks all the time now. And we do drills, lots of drills. We drill intubation procedures. We drill

donning and doffing personal protective equipment. And we drill proning, which is how we position a ventilated patient on their stomach to make it easier for them to get the oxygen they need. It takes six nurses working together to do this, and they have to be synchronized. We drill this over and over.”

Drilling has increased for the operating room nurses at PBMC, too.

“We’ve worked hard to prepare to do surgeries on COVID positive patients,” said

Tara Murray, RN, manager of the PBMC operating room. “Because everybody across the nation is trying to figure this out in real time, there isn’t a clear road map to follow. There’s no standard to-do list yet. We’ve had to create that.”

Rachael Quimby, RN, the MSU charge nurse at WCGH, said the drills demonstrate something else that nurses are very good at – communicating with each other and working with others.

“We absolutely had to create new workflows around COVID-19, but the real challenge has been making sure that everybody who needs

coordinate with the nutritional services team,” Quimby said. “It’s a soft skill, and one they don’t necessarily teach in nursing school; but working well with others, always for the benefit of the patient, is critical to nursing.”

“I think that’s why we are so prepared for COVID-19,” she said.

Murray, the operating room manager at PBMC, noted another trait that is common among so many nurses at PBMC and WCGH: The desire to go wherever patients need care.

“Because we’ve temporarily suspended elective surgeries, our volume is down in the

operating room,” Murray said. “So I’ve felt this desire to go help out in another department or even another part of the country. Watching the news and seeing what fellow nurses in New York are going through brings me to tears. You want to go and help.”

You feel a little guilty because you feel like you should be doing something. And then you recognize the importance of staying with your unit and making sure you’re ready when it’s your turn.”

Asked how the challenges around COVID-19 have shaped her view of her chosen profession, Murray paused a moment to reflect.

“If anything, it’s only deepened my commitment to being a nurse,” she said. “I am proud to be a nurse.”

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— Nicole Kenney, RN, director of acute and critical care nurses at WCGH

the information about a new workflow has it.”

These new workflows don’t just apply to her fellow nurses, Quimby said, but often involve other departments. For example, Quimby’s team determined that certified nurse assistants (CNA) should deliver meals to patients to reduce the risk of COVID-19 contact. Previously, nutritional services delivered all meals to patients’ rooms.

“So we had a new workflow, but to make it work we had to

COVID-19

What you need to know about the coronavirus

In alignment with guidance from Governor Mills and the Centers for Disease Control, MaineHealth is resuming time-sensitive services across our health system. If you have a chronic condition or serious illness, it is important to see your doctor and continue with recommended procedures and surgeries. Postponing care could result in serious complications. For questions about time-sensitive care, please visit: mainehealth.org/time-sensitive-care.