



## Rediscovering a history of nursing management: From Nightingale to the modern matron

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This paper presents an examination of distinct periods in the development of nursing in order to rediscover a history of nursing management in England. The overall purpose is to demonstrate that uncritical accounts written in the past have not adequately explained the complex factors that have shaped nursing management in England. It is also suggested that the approach taken may be usefully applied to other national contexts.

**Design:** This is a review article which first establishes the value of historical perspectives in increasing understanding of nursing and then goes on to analyse the professional, social and political forces that contributed to the development of nursing management.

**Data sources:** A range of historical and contemporary sources is accessed to support the review.

**Review methods:** The review is informed by an historical approach which also seeks recourse to current literature to develop a critical narrative analysis which has an international dimension.

**Conclusions:** The history of nursing management has been 'lost' in celebratory and uncritical accounts of nursing as a whole. The important influence of key figures other than Nightingale has been overlooked and it emerges that nursing management has a longer and more complex history than is generally accepted.

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### What is already known about the topic?

- It is widely accepted that nursing management originated with the Nightingale reforms;
- The model of a female head of the nursing service is thought to have originated with the recommendations made by Nightingale;
- Nursing management at ward level is crucial to the quality of service delivery.

### What this paper adds

- The origins of an organised form of nursing management 'pre-date' Nightingale;

- The impact of social factors, such as gender, are particularly significant in the development of nursing management;
- The history of nursing management has been subsumed in the 'general' history of nursing;
- It is important to access specific aspects of nursing history to inform current policy debates;
- Context specific historical analyses are necessary to deepen understanding of nursing management on an international scale.

### 1. Introduction and background

The history of the management of nursing in England has received relatively little attention in the literature when compared with the level of scrutiny directed towards the history of professionalisation, and particularly the role of education and training in this process. It is more than 150

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years since the introduction of the first recognised system of female control over the entire nursing and domestic workforce of a hospital, which took place at Kings College Hospital in 1856 by the Anglican sisterhood of Saint John's House (Helmstadter, 1994). Yet the subsequent issues that surround the origins and development of the management of nursing up to the present day are not generally widely known or understood within the profession.

The history of the management of nursing tends to be subsumed in celebratory accounts of the general history of nursing. On the whole these take the form of a narrative of professionalisation which trace the origins of modern nursing back to Florence Nightingale, report its development in subsequent years, and then bemoan the gradual erosion of the autonomy of the nursing profession through to its nadir in the National Health Service, which followed the introduction of general management, in the 1980s (DHSS, 1983; Owens and Glennerster, 1990; Strong and Robinson, 1990). Making sense of the history of management in nursing has been further complicated by recent moves in England to create the post of modern matron with both politicians and others looking back to an idyllic 'golden age' of nursing when infection control, cleaning, and feeding of patients, amongst many other things, were thought to be unproblematic. Although all professions and groups have myths and traditions (Dingwall and Allen, 2001), the notion of the all powerful, all knowing matron has been perpetuated in nursing and to some extent casts a shadow over efforts to evaluate the past. For example, the work of Ardern (2002) is an uncritical account of the work of matrons in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similarly, although Carney (2005) identifies the significant contribution of women as nurse managers in Ireland and England, the focus is on reporting rather than analysing their achievements in the wider context of the health care environment of the time. Recently the history of nursing management has been used as a reference point for present day practice and new initiatives in relation to the modern matron role (Hewison, 2001; Dealey et al., 2007). This paper presents an analysis that goes beyond using history simply as a starting point for a discussion of contemporary events. It seeks to examine how particular social and political forces shaped nursing management in England and suggest that what this reveals has relevance in the wider international context.

Davies (1980) has observed that conventional history does not generally appear in accounts governed by theory, it is most often presented as a narrative of events which sets out historical facts. However, these facts do not spring out of history unbidden, rather they emerge on the basis of their salience and significance to people with particular questions and/or perspectives in mind. A different orientation could well produce other 'facts' and it is important to examine the questions asked as well as the answers given, because this can also affect the nature of the account produced (Davies, 1980). The aim here is to revisit the narrative, referred to above, and 'surface' salient and significant facts about the history of nursing management in England, including its international impact. If this is to be achieved the benefits of adopting an historical approach need to be explored.

## 2. The value of history to an understanding of policy and management

The behavioural and social sciences are dominant when it comes to analyses of management and policy. However, they can reinforce a presentist stance and create general theory which may not be related to the past (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Pollitt, 2008). The past informs and re-informs the present, yet present day management studies often ignore the cumulative impact of past events and decisions which have determined the form and structure of existing organisations in favour of explanations based on laws and theory (Kieser, 1994; Bedeian, 1998; Pollitt, 2008). Similarly, in health care Timmins (2008) has observed that in little more than a decade, an important lesson from history was forgotten with successive governments creating powerful provider institutions before establishing strong and effective bodies to decide what care the health service wants to buy from them. The result: 'History is repeating itself-if not yet as a tragedy, then certainly as a farce' (Timmins, 2008, p. 23). Present day organisations reflect culture-specific historical developments, and one way in which the differences between organisations in different cultures can be explained is to use an historical approach. An examination of history can also aid analysis of organisational structures and management systems in terms of testing theories by considering them in an historical context (Kieser, 1994; Usdiken and Kieser, 2004).

A similar position exists in aspects of health policy, such as public health where history is often ignored in training programmes. Emphasis is understandably given to the 'here and now' and research located in the tradition of the behavioural sciences is conducted to answer pressing public health concerns (Berridge and Gorsky, 2004). However, in doing this, the factors which have helped determine how the present situation has come about may be overlooked. If a more inclusive historical stance were taken potential solutions from the past, which offer different models for public health policy and practice, may be discovered (Berridge, 2000). An example of this approach can be found in the work of Szepter (1999). He analysed the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain in order to better understand how the associated threats of disruption, deprivation, disease and death can be dealt with in modern day China, which is experiencing a similar process in the present century. Clearly when appropriately applied the study of the past can have relevance to analysing present day situations and problems in a range of countries.

In view of this, scholars in the field of policy and organisational studies are calling for the use of history in the analysis of current situations, issues and policies (Berridge and Gorsky, 2004; Pollitt, 2008). However, this needs to move beyond an unproblematic and celebratory narrative. There has been widespread criticism of what has been termed *Heathrow Organisation Theory* (Burrell, 1997; Despenza, 2000; Jackson, 2001). This refers to a genre of texts which seek to explain how successful management and organisation can be achieved. They constitute an eclectic mix with some using particular historical episodes

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