

Florence Nightingale (May 12 1820 - August 13 1910) was born rich and managed to carve a path of her own, refusing to marry despite significant pressure. She was a polymath, a statistician, an empathic and kind nurse and an organisational genius. She founded modern nursing.

After years of persistence, her father allowed her to become a nurse and she initially worked to give healthcare to the workers in her local community. She volunteered to go to the military hospitals in Turkey during the Crimean war, heading up a team of 40 nurses (although she became a nurse by a 'calling' from God, she wouldn't take nurses who were going to evangelise, she wanted women who would care for their patients). She wasn't welcome by the Doctors or the military but her steadfastness won out. She set up systems to make the hospital work properly, and she believed that sanitation was so important that she rented a flat, bought washing tubs and paid local women to wash the sheets, towels and clothes for the first time. After a particularly bloody battle, she set up a triage system that saw the most critically injured receive help for the first time, when previously higher ranked officials were treated first, whatever their injury. She is noted as saying "any officer who doesn't like it can do without care at all!"

Complaints were made to the highest military level that the officers got their toast late, and Florence told them very clearly that she was using the kitchen to feed the patients first and they would just have to wait. She arranged for deliveries of homemade gifts sent from England and when the Army tried to sell the items and give the soldiers basic rations instead she stopped them, essentially telling that it would be a PR nightmare if the women back home found out their hand knitted socks and jam had been sold instead of given to their beloved soldiers.

Historians will tell you that the Sanitation commission that came out to the Hospital at Scutari is what saved the lives of the soldiers there from dying of disease, but it was Florence that began logging data the second she arrived on site. They hadn't even been keeping a tally of the dead before then, but she kept logs of who died and how they died, as well as making her nurses keep extensive charts. Without this rigorous collecting of information, no one would have known that sanitation was such a deadly problem.

After Crimea, as well as founding what we know of as modern nursing, she went on to collect and analyse statistical data to help design systems that would make hospitals safer places. She sent out extensive surveys to hospitals in India, seeking to improve sanitation not just for the British Colonists, but also for the local population, which was also rare for her time.

She told her nurses to wash their hands, wash their hands, and wash their hands again.

She also spent her evenings taking down letters from soldiers to send to their families, and wrote to the families of soldiers who had died to tell them what had happened, and she would have had a lamp with her on these occasions. We know her as 'the lady with the lamp' largely because of Victorian propaganda, using her work to evade questions about insufficient supplies being made available to military hospitals. She was known by those who worked with her as a formidable woman, who would circumnavigate the military chains of command if she needed supplies for her patients by breaking into the storeroom and taking what she needed to help them, on one occasion staring down an officer on a horse until he let her pass with the medical supplies she had taken. So in Turkey she was known as the 'woman with the hammer'.

How relevant Florence's work is just now is astonishing. She worked with epidemiologists and statisticians and used graphic visualisations of data to help lay people and Politicians understand the information so that they would ultimately make policy based on scientific evidence.

She believed that everybody deserved healthcare, wherever they were from, whatever class they were born into. She would have been a staunch supporter of the NHS had she lived to see it, and she would be hammering down store cupboards just now to get our medical workers and patients in hospitals the protection they need. She said that "The very first requirement in a hospital is that it should do the sick no harm." And to do that, they need proper supplies.