Public health and Nurse Nightingale

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Vancouver CoastalHealth
Promoting wellness. Ensuring care.

Since 1981, May 12 has been Canada Health Day; since 1820, it's been the birthday of Florence Nightingale. Coincidence? Not at all. Among her many accomplishments and contributions to society, Florence Nightingale might be considered the first public health worker.

Of course there had been physicians and health practitioners for quite some time before Nurse Nightingale came along, but many of today's "public health" ideas can be traced directly to her work and her ideas on healthcare.

"Public health" is not the same as the "healthcare system," nor the "health of the public" though it is close to the latter. One good dictionary definition of public health is: "the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through organized efforts of society."

What does that mean? Public health is about creating healthy environments and communities, and about promoting and protecting the health of Canadians. Public health workers are specialized professionals working to promote health and prevent disease and injury. That means they ensure water and food are safe, that community and work places are safe, they monitor risks for disease and injury and help prevent both. They inform and educate people about how to live active, healthy lives.

Canada Health Day is dedicated to recognizing new developments in public health, and in the contributions made by workers in the field. It is a time to reflect on success, and to show appreciation for public health workers, an integral part of the good life we have.

…vaccinations, clean water, pasteurization and better living conditions… examples of a relatively small investment made that has paid off with enormous returns.

Public health in Canada has existed for more than 100 years. During that time there have been advances in life expectancy and the overall health and quality of life that are the result of public health initiatives. Among these are providing vaccinations, clean water, pasteurization and better living conditions. Each of these is an example of a relatively small investment made that has paid off with enormous returns. We have seen decreased costs due to illness and the improvement of our society and economy because we have, relative to many other nations, a healthy population.

Many of the things we take for granted today can be traced back to the early days of public health — this is where Florence Nightingale comes in. She is important both for what she did, and what she represents. Her life is a story of personal commitment and sacrifice to improve the health and welfare of all people, and it has been an example for health professionals around the world for more than a century.

After serving in the British army during the Crimean war, she returned to England where she continued her efforts to improve the health and living conditions of British soldier. Based on her work, a Royal Commission was established which led to the creation of the Army Medical School in 1857. Among Florence Nightingale's many contributions to public health, perhaps the most notable was the creation of the Nightingale School for Nurses in England in 1860.

So, May 12 is a special day for many reasons, not the least of which is that we live in a country that values the health of its citizens, and one where ongoing investments in public health will continue to improve all our lives. Thank you Nurse Nightingale!

Dr Paul Martiquet is the Medical Health Officer for the Coast Garibaldi Region including Powell River, the Sunshine Coast, Sea-to-Sky, Bella Bella and Bella Coola.