

## Meaningful Words: Why the Importance of Nurses and Midwives Has Never Been Greater

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*In 2020 the world was forced to recognize the key role of nurses and midwives in every healthcare setting. Their strength and bravery serve as both their legacy from the past and as a resolution for the future, where their role is valued for its true worth.*

In 1854, Florence Nightingale and 38 volunteer nurses arrived in Scutari, Turkey, to care for British soldiers wounded in the Crimean War (Fee & Garofalo, 2010). What they accomplished was remarkable under many points of view and revealed nurses' attitude "to lead, to organize, and to get things done" (Nightingale & Stark, 1993). In 2020, on the 200th anniversary of her birth, another war was bravely fought in all corners of the world against COVID-19, and revealed the same courage, determination, professionalism, and attitude to get things done. The scenario of war was infinitely bigger and nurses and midwives were present and engaged in every setting of care: hospitals, territories, nursing homes, patients' homes, red danger zones, remote areas, urban areas, prisons, etc. Their presence is so functional to the healthcare system that it is not possible to renounce.

Italy was hit hard by COVID-19 and it is still fighting against an unprecedented menace that required extreme lockdown measures and a diametrical change to everyday life. Even if Tuscany was not the worst-hit region by the pandemic, the healthcare system was heavily engaged in a battle against an unknown threat and the population feared it would be abandoned by the system. The imperative was to avoid hospitalizations, if not strictly necessary. In dealing with COVID-19, hospitals made space for intensive care beds and restricted access as much as possible.

Tuscany's healthcare system includes three Local Health Authorities and four University

Hospitals serving a population of about 3.8 million. The experiences reported refer to the Local Health Authority of Central Tuscany (LHA-CT), an organization with a catchment area of 1.6 million people. It consists of 13 hospitals and 220 local facilities. The mission of the LHA-CT is to serve individuals and groups for the protection of their health as well as ensure and improve the quality of life and well-being of its population through comprehensive, personalized, secure, and evidence-based care. The main aim is to provide homogeneous and equitably services accessible through a continuous assessment in order to adapt the organization accordingly. This mission was jeopardized by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the LHA-CT and patients feared that resources to cope with the crisis would be insufficient. The only way to survive the crisis was the creation of a more flexible organization that reached patients at home, providing them the same specialized interventions and appropriate care and interventions as those offered in the hospital setting.

### COVID-19 as an Organizational Accelerator

Tuscany has gone from a provisional model, which did not add much value either to patients or to professionals, to the creation of the Family and Community Nurse (FCN) model which will be effective throughout the region by the end of 2020. The FCN pool is not uniquely defined but organized according to the demographic and epidemiological characteristics of the area concerned. Each formally trained FCN is

responsible for a geographically based share of people (3,000), of whom 300-400 are classified as patients with chronic conditions. The pilot implementation started in 2018. By early 2020, the process underwent a sharp acceleration to fight COVID-19 by virtue of necessity and emergency regional law. Every FCN was paired with a specialist doctor (usually a geriatrician) and together they reached complex patients at home, providing care for COVID-19 positive patients who were no longer in need of hospitalization, those in need of intermediate care interventions, nursing home residents who were infected with the virus, and patients with chronic conditions who needed continuous care. The rapid response provided proved suitable for the system, hence it will be part of the “new normal” that will follow the pandemic.

The care of pregnant women also needed to be addressed. LHA-CT provides low-risk midwife-led care for low-risk pregnancies, birth, and postpartum period, ensuring continuous care and risk monitoring. In Empoli, a medium-sized city of the USL Toscana Centro area (49,000 residents and over 1,000 deliveries per year), the city hospital provides a natural childbirth room, where the woman experiences midwife-led care and can stay with her partner until discharge. After the birth and a prompt homecoming, the family still benefits from the assistance of the midwife in the first months of the newborn's life. Moving the focus from the hospital to the home and community is an imperative that embodies necessities and the very survival of the healthcare system.

## Nursing's Impact and Value

According to Keepnews, ...the true value of nursing services is difficult to quantify economically. Nursing cannot be reduced to economic terms, nor should it be. Nursing is a humanizing factor in a health care system increasingly focused on cost. Identifying nursing's economic value should not overshadow the human values – caring, compassion, respect, advocacy, social justice – that form part of nursing's core. (2013, p. 3)

Nurses and midwives provided immense economic value. This importance is especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in critical areas such as readmission avoidance, cost containment, decreased length of stay, and avoided acute episodes of chronic conditions. As Clarke and coauthors (2017) stated, the increasing costs in multimorbidity must be avoided and home-based care must be strengthened as this approach will be key to cost effective, socially appropriated care. Nurses and midwives are the key to person and family-centered care, and the direct relation they will build with patients and households through time will lead them to be trusted, facilitating patient compliance with care.

## Meaningful Words: ‘They do more than I could ever imagine’

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by FCNs with their patients during June 2020, as a convenience and representative sample of the vast area of LHA-CT. Six patients and their family members/caregivers were interviewed during the time of home-based care.

The first question dealt with trust: *Do you feel you can put your trust in the nurses that follow you?* The answer to this question was homogeneous through the entire sample, and it was a clear *yes*. Patients said this trust lays in the competences of nurses' interventions and in their availability.

Second question: *Do you think that the care you received met your healthcare need?* Patients and caregivers reported the care received went beyond the immediate need and the single performance the nurse was required to fulfill. They reported a general feeling of being fully taken care of, and that the nurse was approaching the whole family as part of the problem and above all part of possible solutions. The nurse became a point of reference, as this repeatedly made assertion demonstrates: “They do more than I could ever imagine.” As evidence of nursing's impact, the LHA-CT experienced an increased request for home-based care.

The third question dealt with the pandemic: *Did you feel abandoned during this COVID-19 period of lockdown?* In this time of fear and uncertainty, no interviewed patient reported

experiencing abandonment. The continuity of care by LHA-CT revealed the important pressures of the pandemic and the quarantine measures that were required. Patients' words tell stories of presence and care:

- “*Our* nurse keeps track of everything that happens to us.”
- “*Our* nurse is the glue between all the specialists.”
- “Having a nurse following everything that happens to me is always better.”

To highlight the role of midwives, an extended interview was conducted with patient I.N. and her partner as they experienced a complete midwife-led care birth path in Empoli City Hospital, from the family planning clinic to the hospital where I.N. gave birth in the natural childbirth room. The patient's insights demonstrate the stability and security in this moment of generalized panic and fear for the future experienced by women who were about to give birth during a pandemic, and were frightened to put the newborn in danger.

*Do you feel you can put your trust in the midwife that followed you?*

I didn't know about the possibility of being part of such a path until *my* midwife told me that she could take care of my pregnancy. She accompanied me in every step. She had a reassuring approach, even when I told her that I had a million questions in my head, and that some of them were really silly. She told me that no question was silly and that she was there for me and all my questions. That was the most reassuring thing that I could be told, and I clearly remember the relief I felt, knowing that I was in good hands.

*Do you think that the care you received met your healthcare needs?*

Completely. Let me give you an example. I'm usually constipated, and I prefer not to treat this condition with drugs. She investigated my routines and habits and she recommended that I vary my diet. And thanks to some advice only, I immediately felt better, without the need of taking any drug. This was really surprising to me, as the very first thing doctors do is

prescribe some kind of pills. The baby had oral thrush, the pediatrician prescribed an oral gel that made the baby not willing to eat, and as a result of that didn't gain any weight. The midwife told me to try to put some bicarbonate and water on the baby's tongue; this intervention made my baby willing to eat again, gain weight, and made me be serene again.

*Do you feel the continuity of care is effective since the midwife is taking care of you?*

Absolutely. She took care of me through all the stages, before and after the birth. I met her before the delivery, and I trusted her. When I got to the hospital for the delivery she was there, and I did not feel lost. When back home, I knew I could call her, so I felt safe.

## Promoting the Legacy

There are many ways in which nurses and midwives create value for their patients. This is because they are, first and foremost, the capital of every healthcare system. This “human capital” must be considered an essential asset that requires investment to make it grow and increase skills and competences. COVID-19 revealed how “governments and organizations have acted and reacted over a short period, providing important lessons for the future” (Agostino et al., 2020, para. 4), and they all invested in territorial care, performed by nurses and midwives. If a crisis strikes, the most valuable asset is used and empowered, and this pandemic showed us exactly this dynamic. It will be vital to continue down this path, recognizing these nursing professionals for their importance, keeping in mind that both provider and patient are an integral part of the economic input-output healthcare production equation (Hall, 2003). \$

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