Celebrating 150 years of District Nursing

Student nurses and nurses currently working in the service recently gathered together with retired district nurses to celebrate a special milestone in nursing history.

June marked 150 years of District Nursing and a special event was held in the Caibeath Hotel in Stornoway to mark the historic occasion. Amongst those in attendance were Julia Quickfall, Queen's Nursing Institute; Sandy Matheson, Lord Lieutenant of the Western Isles; Catherine Morrison, winner of the Community Nurse of the Year Award; John Angus MacKay, Chair of NHS Western Isles; Gordon Jamieson, Chief Executive of NHS Western Isles and Elenor MacLeay, Employee Director (NHSWI).

Catherine Morrison welcomed those in attendance and stressed that ‘we should be very proud of our history, because in many ways community nursing led the way’.

She explained that District Nursing took off in the islands in 1912 when the Highlands and Islands Medical Service came into being.

Elenor MacLeay recalled how a District Nurse had inspired her career choice. “When I look back I realise it was the District Nurses that inspired me to be a nurse,” she explained. “Sister Barron was known throughout the community and had an intriguing black bag. I had to get an old handbag from my mother and she used to give me the odd bandage and bottle and I had a bag full of these. My doll, cat and dog were not safe – they were all bandaged to the hilt.

“When I acquired a needle for knitting socks, I was on the floor one day, while my mother was having tea and chatting with her friend. They were paying no attention to me so I told my mother’s friend I was going to give her an injection, and pushed the knitting needle into her knee and her cup and saucer landed on the floor and she ended up with a big bruise. I didn’t get off to a great start!”

Gordon Jamieson stressed that he was proud of his nursing background, and explained that there are still some of the same challenges around in terms of the health of the population.

Sandy Matheson gave a historical account of district nursing which was interesting to all in attendance.

“District Nursing – a personal account by Catherine Mackay – ‘Ceatag Dhanaidh’

“It was on the first of March 1946 that I came to Ness as a District Nurse. I believe I was 29 or 30 years of age at the time. There was a cottage provided for me to live in – next door to Calum Te’s house in Cross…

On my first day as a district nurse, I went out on my rounds. My first visit was to Mairi na Polaig who had given birth a few days earlier to a baby daughter, Morag… ‘It’s about time someone like you came on the scene,’ she said. ‘I’m dying from hunger – asking the children to bring me some milk and oatcakes when no-one’s about. I’m not allowed to eat for 10 days – I can have a soft boiled egg.’

‘That’s a load of nonsense,’ I told her, ‘you can eat anything you like!’ She ate to her heart’s content that day and every day after that.

When I started in the district I used to pay all my calls on foot – from Aird Dell to the end of Habost. There were no cars on the road for getting lifts – sometimes I managed to catch the 2 o’clock and 4 o’clock buses. I was so active at that time, it didn’t bother me. … Shortly after that, I acquired a bicycle and the young lads started to teach me how to ride it. It was in March, when the manure was being carted to the crofts and Calum Mhurdaig was teaching me. That devil Sughan was with him. One of them stood at the outer end of the croft and the other at the inner and they made sure they would direct me straight into a heap of manure in my uniform!

A very common ailment in those days were sores/bolts on the soles of their feet. Most people went around bare-footed as shoes were few and far between. The common practice for such sores was a form of poultice made up with melted margarine on a pint of lint. The latter was applied regularly to the sepsis whilst still hot. Once it cooled another one was applied until the boil/sore burst and the pus began to drain from the sore.

The hours I worked in those days were really long. If you managed to get a half day off a week you were lucky. I was on call day and night… I had to attend every birth, I had to weigh all the babies monthly until they were a year old. You had to attend them if they were ill… I remember meeting children on the road and they would ask me if I had a baby in my bag today! The kids in those days thought I brought babies to the homes in my bag.”
What I could have done with five pounds!

I remember when at Castle Terrace there was a note to call up this address, which was an address in the West End. I went to the address and there was a young lady, she was 26 years of age and I had been asked to give her an enema. It was a beautiful house, I don’t think I was ever in such a house, her husband was a ship owner and he was away in the war and there was a housekeeper downstairs. She probably would have been a private patient but they couldn’t be because the doctors and nurses were away at the war. I made that my first 9 o’clock in the morning and the patient was desperately ill as far as I could make out. She was on her side in the bed, her mouth was dry and she had pains up to her shoulder, so I went on my knees in front of the bed and I said ‘by any chance have you been pregnant?’ ‘Well’, she said, ‘it is six weeks since I had a period’. I ran downstairs as there was a phone and I phoned for the doctor and I said to come here at once. The doctor came and said to me ‘you stay right here, I’m going to get a consultant in gynaecology in the Royal’. So I stayed and the pair of them came back and Mr Millar examined her and she went off immediately to a nursing home. I went to do my other work and more or less forgot about the incident. When I went back for lunch I was called to go to the superintendent’s office. The superintendent said ‘there has been a message from the nursing home to thank you for your prompt attention and to let you know that the patient is ok. They have sent you a gift of five pounds, but you can’t have it, you are not allowed to take money’. If it had been handkerchiefs or stockings I could have had it! Five pounds was more than I was paid – I got two pounds fifty a month at the time! I will never forget thinking about what I could have done with the money!

(personal account)

Achinsuggle!

Morag was from Lewis and working in Glasgow doing her midwifery during the war. One evening during a blackout, she had to go on a visit which meant she had to travel on the tram.

She boarded the tram in darkness, her bag in hand, with only her torch to guide her. The tram conductor grabbed Morag’s arm as she came on and said: ‘how far are you going?’. When Morag told him, he said: ‘fine you just sit here on the platform and at each stop when passengers come on, shout ‘Achinsuggle’ as loud as you can as they cannot see what tram it is’. She didn’t know if he thought she was a corporation worker as it was so dark, but she didn’t argue and for the rest of the journey this 21 year old Lewis girl in her best Glasgow accent shouted ‘Achinsuggle’. Morag will always remember Achinsuggle although she never had a patient there!

(personal account)

Recipes from the Queen’s Nurses’ Magazine

Tapioca Cream Soup | 1920
One pint of good chicken or veal stock
1 tablespoonful crushed tapioca or sago
1 gill of cream
2 yolks of eggs

Method
Put the stock into a saucepan, and when it boils shake in the tapioca or fine sago. Cook until clear. Beat the yolks of eggs in a small basin with the cream; add a little pepper and salt. Strain into the soup. Stir over the fire for a minute to cook the eggs, but do not boil or it will curdle. Serve.

Fricassee of Tripe | 1946
Tripe is often available, and if the patient likes it, is very suitable for an invalid.
½ lb dressed tripe
½ oz margarine
¼ pint milk and stock
1 dessertspoonful chopped parsley
Small onion
½ oz flour
Seasoning

Method
Wash and cut up tripe. Cover with water and bring to boil. Drain. Cover with stock or fresh water. Add salt and onion, finely sliced. Cook very gently until tender. Strain. To make the sauce, melt margarine, add flour, and blend over the gas and gradually add ¼ pint liquid. Bring to boil, stirring all the time and cook for three minutes. Season. Reheat tripe in the sauce, and lastly add parsley.

Corned Beef and Raisin Sandwiches | 1946
4 oz corned beef – flaked
2 oz seedless raisins
1 tablespoonful mayonnaise
Bread and margarine

Method
Pour boiling water over raisins, allow to stand for 10 minutes, drain and chop. Mix with corn beef and mayonnaise. Spread between buttered slices of bread, cut into fancy shapes and serve garnished with parsley.

Annie Maclean, Nurse Ruadh (above), was born at 12 Crowlista in 1872 and served as district nurse in Uig before taking up the post in Tarbert, where she worked until her death in 1940, and was much loved. The following is from the Stornoway Gazette on the announcement of her death:

“She had a most cheerful disposition and this virtue was in very many cases of greater value to the patient than the doctor’s prescription. She was always happy and cracked jokes which drew, temporarily at least, the patient’s thoughts from his or her own suffering.

“In 1915 she took up duties at Tarbert, where the geographical difficulties confronting her were even more formidable than at Uig. Here, again, by her unusual characteristics and willingness to help, she greatly endeared herself to the inhabitants of her district. She took great pleasure in her work and despite advancing years remained tireless and active. She worked under Dr Ross for the long period of thirty-three years, which we feel is a record.”