

Celebrating 150 years of District Nursing



Former District Nurse Ina MacLennan, Leverburgh Home, cuts the special cake.

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 Caberfeidh 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.



This photo of a District Nurse from Uist made its way to Sweden on the front page of a QNIS report!

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 Polai 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/boils 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)