

Book review

Enlightened Charity: The Holistic Nursing Care, Education, and 'Advices Concerning the Sick' of Sister Matilda Coskery, 1799–1870

By Martha M. Libster and Sister Betty Ann McNeil. Golden Apple Publications, 2009, \$29.95 (paperback), 503 pages, inc. appendices, endnotes, and index. ISBN 9780975501825.

This history is the inspiring and informative story of the role of the Daughters of Charity (DC), Emmitsburg, Maryland, in early and middle 19th century development of hospitals for charitable care of the sick poor, particularly the insane (preferred term of that era), and of American professional nursing education nearly fifty years prior to introduction of the secular Nightingale Model from London, which became the standard of professional nursing suppressing religious influences from the history of American nursing. Libster and McNeil write, 'Secularization became equated with professionalism' (p. xvi). Within the text is documentation of an innovative practice in care of the insane that was respectful, using limited restraints and implementing what Sister Matilda called moral care. In the Preface, Libster wrote of her contemporary nursing students, 'They are often astonished to find the professional values they hold, such as evidence-based reflective practice; critical thinking; leadership; professional ethics; and holistic, spiritually guided service described in the history of the early sisters' (xviii). One finds that today's holistic care was anticipated about 160 years ago (p. 227). Important applicable contemporary terms include nursing presence and therapeutic environment. Sister's documented care goes beyond today's secular standards because of the Christian respect for each person as a child of God (p. 219). Telling the story of an accurate

nursing history is an essential contribution of this text.

In addition to the merciful (enlightened) care provided is a record of the political and financial stressors experienced by DC nurses founding medical facilities as physicians sought to control the American health-care system, especially resident management of hospital care. Chapters one and two relate the history of the Sisters of Charity, then DC (after 1840) and their holistic education grounded in gospel counsels of humility, simplicity and charity (p. 17) and the 17th century teachings of Sts. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac which stressed independence of the sisters in their facilities. These were incorporated into '*The Rule of 1812*' for the American Sisters of Charity.

The book contains Sister Matilda's journal account of the early financial and administrative history of the Mount Hope Retreat with its origins in the Mount St. Vincent hospital founded when the Sisters left the University of Maryland Medical School Infirmity in 1839 over a dispute on 'the level of authority the Sisters should have in managing the hospital and its patients' (Ch. 3, p. 83). *Enlightened Charity* is the first publication of Sister Matilda's complete hand-written text *Advices Concerning the Sick* (*Advices* thereafter) – 'the nursing fundamentals textbook for new Sister-Nurses that demonstrates her nursing skill as well as her thoughts and feelings about nursing the sick and insane.' (p. xx) *Advices* is published uncut and without commentary as Appendix B (pp. 344–393), but Libster and McNeil provide extensive commentary, section by section, on the approach to care of the insane and interventions for a variety of common ailments in the early 19th century (Ch. 5, pp. 161–281). The *Advices* includes descriptions of corporal, mental, emotional, and spiritual care that anticipates the above mentioned contemporary holistic care, as well as detailed recipes for interventions, prescriptions for independent nursing practice and advice for assisting and

carrying out physician's orders. These instructions will be of interest to the historian of 19th century medical and nursing procedures for a variety of conditions, as initially the insane and the poor were kept in the same hospitals. From instructions on care of sites and how to blister patients the authors conclude Coskery's *Advices* was written well before 1850 when blistering fell out of favour (p. 195).

As a community the DC founded and managed their own hospital facilities by Sister Servants as well as providing patient care with Sister Nurses. Libster and McNeil write, 'Sister Matilda was the Sister Servant or head nurse of the new hospital (Mount St. Vincent's). Dr. Stokes served only as consulting physician to the SC Nurses who owned and administered all activities at the hospital, an unusual achievement for women of the period . . . By establishing his role as "consulting" physician rather than "resident" physician, Stokes and the Sisters of Charity challenged the emerging medical dominance in American health-care.' (p. 3) Dr Stokes had interned at the Baltimore Infirmary where he 'worked alongside the Sisters of Charity Nurses who had assumed the 'whole direction and management of the institution' in 1823 at the request of the professors of the College of Medicine of Maryland at the University of Maryland (p. 1). The Sister's use of physician consultants and their opposition to the administrative authority of physicians is an important part of the 19th century history of medicine. Sister Matilda recorded the sickroom management advise of Dr Dewees (1833) with significant omission of his requirement that the nurse follow physician orders implicitly (ibid, p. 27) and that her moral qualities include a duty to 'passive obedience; and when she refuses this, she breaks a contract; and if she follow her own promptings in the management of the patient, she betrays a trust, by which, she may counteract the best devised plan of treatment.' (Ibid, p. 28) This expectation contradicted the DC expectation that nurses prescribe natural remedies in place of prescribed medications as indicated by the physical and mental state of the patient (p. 252).

The final chapter of the book directly addresses the myth that professional nursing owes its origin to

secularization. Reflecting Gospel values, of Sister Matilda it was written, 'She was an eye to the blind, a staff to the lame, a precious balm to the wounded heart. She wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced.' (p. 286) A professional level of practice is found in the following statements of Libster and McNeil, 'The sister's rules required obedience and humility to physicians, but as is found in Sister Matilda's history, they were not reticent about questioning the orders of a physician and making their own recommendations if it would improve patient care and safety.' (p. 290) 'In the late 1870s the DC left the Baltimore Infirmary after fifty years of partnership with the medical college. The State of Maryland by that time owned the college, the University of Maryland School of Medicine, which boasts to this day that it is the fifth-oldest medical school in the nation and the first to institute a residency training program, which was made possible by the partnership with the Sisters and then Daughters of Charity begun in 1823.' (p. 300) Physician-authored advice books were among the forces that raised concerns about the autonomous practice of nurses, but nursing authors also perpetuated the myth that there was no professional nursing and no American nurse-training schools in late 19th century (p. 304).

While one may not accept the religious world view of this book, *Enlightened Charity* is very interesting for its historical account of nursing and medicine in 19th century USA, and the actual formulary account of therapies and personal interventions. It goes a long way toward presenting another side of the rise of humanistic and professional nursing practice.

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Reference

- Dewees W. (1833) A practice of physic: comprising most of the diseases not treated in "Diseases of Females" and "Diseases of Children". Philadelphia: Carey, Lee & Blanchard.

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