

## History of nursing<sup>1</sup> in Malta [1] Prehistory to Middle Ages

The role of someone to attend to the sick must have existed ever since the evolution of man. The acts of birth, injuries, illness and death must have necessitated some form of attendance. During the ancient times when men had to hunt and work in the fields it is probable the womenfolk of the household performed that nursing. When Christianity started breaking ground, the care of the sick became an act of charity or even a religious vocation. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century there was already an expansion of nursing in the Eastern Church (Constantinople) followed by the Western or Roman Church by the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. In fact there is evidence that a group of women had at this time erected the first primitive hospital for civilians. The lay nurse as an employer of a hospital emerged during the 12<sup>th</sup> century at the Pantocrator of Constantinople where laymen and women attended the sick and received a salary.

There is evidence that nursing in Malta has been practised since the very early settlements. Statuettes discovered in excavations at Mnajdra and the Tarxien Neolithic Temples indicate that the early settlers took care of their sick. Leeches, fomentation and related remedies were applied for particular conditions and diseases. It has also been suggested that the Hypogeum at Hal-Saflieni, c.a. 2000 B.C., be used as a hospital temple. Roman remains include feeding bottles made of pottery and male urinals very close in shape to those used today. This shows that sick people who were bed-bound were cared for. These findings show that the nursing concept was already present on our island, even if it was family based.

Information about nursing in Malta, before the arrival of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem is scarce. Information about the social, political and religious aspects of life in Malta during those times, especially during the early middle ages is almost non-existent.

### **Ospedale Santo Spirito, Rabat – Malta (1347-1967)**

In 1347, Santo Spirito Hospital was one of the first hospitals erected in Malta, together with those of St. Francis in Rabat Malta and the Women's Hospital of St. Peter in Mdina. These hospitals were for the public and kept functioning as such even after the arrival of the Knights in Malta (Cassar, 1965). Among the employees at Santo Spirito, in 1494, there are the *spitalieri*, who worked as male nurses or attendants. Female attendants called *garzuna* and *servitci* replaced these.

In his manuscripts dated 1599, Mgr. T. Gargallo, bishop of Malta, wrote about the presence of these female nurses when he visited the hospital. It seems that these nurses were established as workers in hospital, as the bishop turned to them for information about some apparatus needed for use in hospital. They answered him giving all the details. The number of women employed to take care of the sick were two, attending from six to eight patients each.

In this hospital, work seems to have been allocated to particular professions. There were the surgeons, the barber-surgeons and even the chaplain, whose role included that of overseeing the behaviour of patients and nurses so as to ensure that it does not offend moral values. He also had to prevent nurses and the cook's family from singing and being rowdy! Nurses had orders to see that young spinster ladies stay away from married patients, as far as space permitted. They also had to see that only relatives visit patients especially the lady patients and that visitors did not take in any food. Cleanliness of the ward and sweeping of floors, particularly under the beds, every morning, were also the nurses' responsibilities. Nurses were always warned not to abandon their patients or ward and also not to be rowdy by the main door of the hospital. They had to give special attention to dying patients, look under the patients' mattresses to make sure there was no forbidden food hidden there, put on the oil lamps for the night and not to keep the ward in darkness so as to have the oil for themselves. Infringing any of these regulations carried the punishment of suspension of rations for fifteen days or a month or two deductions in the salary. A second offence could even result in a discharge from the service.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Camilleri, *L-Istorja tan-Nursing f'Malta*, translated into English and edited by Catherine Sharples. The work is mostly based on Paul Cassar's *Medical History of Malta*. Wellcome Hist Med Libr, London, 1964. The work related to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Regulation, Mental Health Education, Institute of Health Care and Single-Level Nursing is material that has been added by Jesmond Sharples.