The Careful Nursing philosophy and professional practice model

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Aims and objectives. To present the Careful Nursing philosophy and professional practice model which has its source in the skilled practice of 19th century Irish nurses and to propose that its implementation could provide a relevant foundation for contemporary nursing practice.

Background. Nursing models are widely considered not relevant to nursing practice. Alarming instances of incompetent and insensitive nursing practice and experiences of powerlessness amongst nurses are being reported. Professional practice models that will inspire and strengthen nurses in practice and help them to address these challenges are needed. Nursing history has been suggested as a source of such models.

Design. Discursive.

Methods. Content analysis of historical documents describing the thinking and practice of 19th century Irish nurses. Identification of emergent categories and subcategories as philosophical assumptions, concepts and dimensions of professional nursing practice.

Results. A philosophical approach to practice encompassing the nature and innate dignity of the person, the experience of an infinite transcendent reality in life processes and health as human flourishing. A professional practice model constructed from four concepts; therapeutic milieu, practice competence and excellence, management of practice and influence in health systems and professional authority; and their eighteen dimensions.

Conclusion. As a philosophy and professional practice model, Careful Nursing can engage nurses and provide meaningful direction for practice. It could help decrease incidents of incompetent and insensitive practice and sustain already exemplary practice. As a basis for theory development, it could help close the relevance gap between nursing practice and nursing science.

Relevance to clinical practice. Careful Nursing highlights respect for the innate dignity of all persons and what this means for nurses in their relationships with patients. It balances attentive tenderness in nurse–patient relationships with clinical skill and judgement. It helps nurses to establish their professional practice boundaries and take authoritative responsibility for their practice.

Key words: careful nursing, history, human dignity, Irish nursing, nursing philosophy, nursing professional practice model

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nursing service in Dublin cholera hospitals, McAuley being given ‘the fullest control’ of patient care (Carroll 1883, p. 295). During this time, they further expanded their knowledge and skills in caring for critically ill patients through working closely with doctors and apothecaries. In 1833, Aikenhead sent three Sisters of Charity to hospitals in Paris for specialised training and in 1835 founded St. Vincent’s hospital in Dublin, the first major hospital owned and operated by nurses in Britain and Ireland in modern times.

By the time of the Crimean war of 1853–1856, they had developed a distinctive nursing system. They were recognised as skilled nurses and had attained ‘brilliant prestige in nursing’ (Dock & Nutting 1907, p. 86). The British government looked to Ireland for nurses to assist Florence Nightingale. Twelve Irish nurses, Sisters of Mercy, served at the war over a 16-month period. Mary Clare Moore, who had ‘trained’ with McAuley during the 1832 cholera epidemic, worked closely with Nightingale (Meehan 2005). Cultural and political conflicts precluded their public recognition, but Nightingale acknowledged privately her reliance on their nursing knowledge and skill, particularly that of Moore. ‘You were far above me in fitness for the General Superintendency’ Nightingale wrote to Moore, ‘what you have done for the work no one can ever say’ (Letter, 29 April 1856), and in a later recollection, ‘how I should have failed without your help’ (Letter, 21 October 1863). Moore has been recognised as one of the greatest influences on Nightingale in nursing matters (Baly 1997). Beginning in 1843, the Irish nursing system also spread internationally as the nurses accompanied the Irish Diaspora, founding and operating hospitals and schools of nursing in many countries.

Careful Nursing as a conceptual model

Careful Nursing was initially developed as conceptual model (Meehan 2003). A preliminary content analysis of historical documents was conducted. Primary sources were documents written by the 19th century Irish nurses and other nurses, surgeons, army officers and purveyors who worked with them or observed them working. These included journals, letters, convent annals, British army records, loose papers and published books, which were identified through an extensive search of convent and national archives in Ireland and the UK. Genuineness of documents was checked to every possible extent by the comparison of handwriting and consultation with other historians familiar with the documents. Authenticity of document content was verified by the comparison of events reported across documents from different sources. Specific documents included McAuley’s guide to the
visitation of the sick (1832), a compilation of McAuley’s letters (Neumann 1969), a compilation of letters and manuscripts of McAuley’s closest nursing associates (Sullivan 1995), the nurses’ Crimean war journals (Bridgeman MF, Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Dublin, unpublished manuscript, Croke 1854–1856a, Croke 1854–1856b, Doyle 1897), descriptions by a fellow nurse (Taylor 1856, 1857) and related British army correspondence (Codrington 1856). Secondary sources were biographies of McAuley (Moore 1841/1995, Harnett 1864, Carroll 1866) and published second-hand descriptions of the nurses’ practice (Murphy 1847, Carroll 1883). Documents were read and reread in depth. Content was categorised and classified according to Weber (1985) and mapped onto the nursing metaparadigm concepts of human being, environment, health and nursing proposed by Fawcett (2000). Most content related to nursing and was summarised in a conceptual model composed of ten practice concepts grouped under four headings, as shown in Fig. 1.

The name, Careful Nursing, was selected from a letter sent by the nurses to the British War Office in 1854 in which they wrote: ‘Attendance on the sick is, as you are aware, part of our Institute; and sad experience amongst the poor has convinced us that, even with the advantage of medical aid, many valuable lives are lost for want of careful nursing’ (Whitty to Yore 18th October 1854).

The structure and utility of the model was assessed and critically analysed by nurses in education and practice in Ireland (Meehan 2006, McMullin et al. 2009) and the US (Roemer 2006). Further elaboration of the model was required to provide more specific direction for practice and theory development. However, reflection on the mapping of the documents’ content onto Fawcett’s (2005) metaparadigm concepts showed that they were inadequate for full explication of the documents’ content. Important philosophical principles inherent in the documents were obscured and at odds with Fawcett’s proposed world views. Fawcett’s approach to knowledge development was put aside and a second more comprehensive, content analysis was undertaken wherein the documents were given the freedom to speak for themselves.

Methods

The document search and verification procedures described for the preliminary analysis were repeated. Additional primary sources were identified and examined (Barrie 1854, 1855a,b, Moore 1854–1856, 1855, Fitzgerald 1855) as were additional secondary sources (Atkinson 1879, Terrot 1898, Doona 1995, Sullivan 2004). Again, documents were read and reread in depth. Following Krippendorff (2004), primary sources were analysed for manifest and latent content. Textual units, each relating to the same central meaning, were identified and hand coded and sorted into categories and subcategories. Secondary sources provided background information.

Seven broad categories emerged. Three categories, human person, an infinite transcendent reality and health, were judged to primarily concern philosophical assumptions underlying nursing practice. Four categories, with a total of eighteen subcategories, were judged to primarily concern attitudes and actions of skilled nursing as a public service. This process, as shown in Fig. 2, was used to reformulate a 19th century nursing system into a 21st century nursing philosophy and professional practice model.

Results

Careful Nursing philosophy

Data giving rise to the philosophical assumptions markedly matched the thinking of Thomas Aquinas (1256–1259/1953, 1265–1274/1948), as he built on and extended the thinking of Aristotle (Ross 1915). Thus, the thinking of Aquinas was drawn upon in elaborating these assumptions, shown in Table 1. They provide the foundation for how nurses think about themselves as nurses, the patients they care for, the nurse–patient relationship and the attitudes and actions they engage in to protect patients and foster their healing and health.
Attention to the nature of the person is especially important because nurse–patient relationships are central in nursing practice. The inherent dignity of all persons is emphasised. In their relationships with patients and with one another, nurses are guided to be conscious of their own unitary nature, inward and outward lives, intrinsic order and beauty and
dignity and worth, as well as their own potential for inconsiderate attitudes and actions. Aquinas’s elaboration of the person’s unitary nature and simultaneously distinguishable explicit realities provides a practical perspective for nurses in their commitment to provide holistic care. As Risjord (2010) observes, attention to the unitary person and the person’s ‘parts’ is not conceptually inconsistent. This perspective can help nurses to be more easily mindful of the unitary nature of patients and themselves, whilst at the same time attending to distinguishable and very real bio-physical and psycho-spiritual needs.

Historically, the experience of an infinite transcendent reality has been central to nursing in the Western world and is widely known to have been fundamental to Nightingale’s experience of herself as a nurse. Following Aristotle, Aquinas refers to this reality as the ‘first mover’ or ‘first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God’ (1265–1274/1948, I Q2 Art.3), whose existence is supported by natural reason and reflection on the data of sense experiences of familiar features of the world. Both Nightingale and the 19th century Irish nurses were inspired and strengthened by their awareness of an infinite transcendent reality in their work as nurses, in the lives of the people they served and in their understanding of healing and health (Sullivan 1999).

Health as human flourishing (DeYoung et al. 2009) is reflected in the descriptions of the nurses’ ideas and their practice attitudes and actions. They shared with Nightingale the assumption that nature heals patients and that the purpose of true nursing is ‘to put the patient in the best condition for nature to act upon him’ (Nightingale 1859/1970, p. 133). Aquinas (1256–1259/1953 Q11) also argued that it was the natural power within the sick person that brought the person to health and that the role of health professionals and their treatments was to act as instruments to aid nature in healing.

Careful Nursing professional practice model

The four categories concerned with the attitudes and actions of skilled nursing as a public service were used to construct the nursing professional practice model, as shown in Fig. 3. To construct the model, the four categories were viewed as interrelated concepts, and their subcategories as interrelated dimensions of the concepts: the therapeutic milieu with five dimensions, practice competence and excellence with eight dimensions, nursing management and influence in health systems with three dimensions and professional authority with two dimensions. The names and definitions of the concepts and dimensions were derived from the historical data.
but expressed in contemporary language. The positions of the concepts and their dimensions shown in the model represent a preliminary proposal of relationships amongst them. Thus, the model provides a conceptual foundation for the subsequent development of nursing theories and contribution to the development of nursing science.

Definitions of the model concepts and their dimensions are presented in Tables 2–5. Although the term ‘therapeutic milieu’ emerged independently from the historical data as a clear and compelling conceptual impression, it has been evident in the mental health nursing literature for some time and its importance recently emphasised by Mahoney et al. (2009).

The definition of the therapeutic milieu dimension of caritas follows Aquinas’s description of the type of love, which was commonly translated in Latin as caritas from the Greek agapē during the 1st century (Batten 1948). The term caritas is used because its English translation as charity has lost its original meaning. Caritas is also included in other nursing models where it is equated with caring (Eriksson 2002, Watson 2006). However, the term caring is not used in the study. The definition of caritas uses the term ‘loving and related to ‘a god or abstract other’ (p. 63), which is similar to the Careful Nursing definition. As a quality of caritas, nurses’ experience of true empathy with patients is the insightful, practical approach to empathy in nursing suggested by Määttä (2006) based on the philosophical research of Edmund Husserl’s assistant Edith Stein (1916/1989).

Definitions of the dimensions of the practice competence and excellence concept that incorporate standardised nursing languages (Flanagan & Jones 2007) and emphasise accuracy (Lunny 2009) clinical judgement (Thompson & Dowding 2009) and monitoring collaborative problems (Carpenito-Moyet 2010) may seem unlikely analogues to 19th century practice. Nonetheless, they reflect in contemporary terms the precise, innovative and efficient practice activities of the 19th century nurses.

Table 2 Therapeutic milieu concept and its five dimensions

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<tr>
<th>Therapeutic milieu</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Caritas</td>
<td>Nurses’ experience and expression of love for patients as the benevolent affection of one human person for another that flows through nurses’ inner awareness of their sharing in the infused love of an infinite transcendent reality. It is a love given irrespective of the characteristics of the person who is loved. It is impartial; unbiased by personal interest or desire for advantage. It disposes nurses to attend to patients with kindness, compassion, great tenderness and a joyous spirit and to experience moments of true empathy with patients. These qualities arise in the inward life and arise in the will, not in transient emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contagious calmness</td>
<td>Nurses’ ability to preserve and project an inner sense of calm even under the most adverse circumstances. It is closely associated with the experience and expression of caritas and characterised by a gentle manner, soothing voice and impression of quiet dependability. Reflected in nurses’ attitudes and actions, it is communicated naturally to patients and others in the therapeutic milieu. It sets the emotional tone of the practice setting and counters anxiety that can arise in response to stressful situations. It engenders in nurses an attitude of composed self-confidence and alertness to the ever-changing needs of patients and practice situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual engagement</td>
<td>Nurses’ ability to conceptualise, think creatively and critically, and theorise about nursing practice using nursing and other related knowledge and to do this in relation to knowledge of the social, political and economic context of their practice. Because the life of the mind is linked partly to the creative influence of an infinite transcendent reality, it includes using contemplation and empathy as well as natural reason, logical analysis and scientific research to guide, implement and evaluate nursing practice and health care.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurses’ care for selves and one another</td>
<td>Nurses’ attentiveness to their own health and the health of one another. This is essential to supporting and augmenting their therapeutic capacity. It includes them nourishing their inward lives through the creative use of their minds and spending at least a short time each day in inner reflection, contemplation, meditation or prayer. It also includes them nourishing their outward lives in relation to aspects such as nutrition, rest, relaxation and exercise, enjoyment of social activities and having a sense of humour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A safe and restorative physical environment</td>
<td>The result of actions nurses take to protect patients from physical harm and promote healing. It is meticulously clean and orderly, free from potentially harmful physical factors, as quiet as possible, and maximises the effects of naturally occurring healing elements such as light, fresh air and colour. Although contemporary nurses mainly delegate to appropriate assistants activities that ensure cleanliness, safety and order, they remain responsible to ensure that these activities are carried out to the highest possible standard.</td>
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</table>
Careful Nursing is fittingly developed as a philosophy and professional practice model rather than as a conceptual model developed according to theoretically predetermined criteria. The philosophy is important because it brings to the fore a nursing-sensitive understanding of the nature of the person and the innate dignity and worth of all persons. Although the model concepts and dimensions will be mostly familiar to nurses, it groups and emphasises them in particular ways. It balances the healing influence of attentive tenderness in nurse–patient relationships and the nursing milieu with knowledgeable nursing judgement and precision in clinical skills. Its history and emphasis on professional authority reminds nurses of their legacy as prime providers of healthcare for vulnerable and underserved populations and as a transforming influence in the provision of hospital services.

Because the philosophy and model present enduring and widely recognised values, attitudes and actions distinctively inherent in skilled nursing practice, it is likely to be found relevant by practicing nurses. Its implementation could help to minimise incompetent and insensitive practice as well as sustain already exemplary practice. The message of Careful Nursing to contemporary nurses is that ‘brilliant prestige in nursing’ is theirs for the taking. But, at the same time, it is for nurses in practice to judge whether Careful Nursing matches their professional identity, their cultural DNA.

Careful Nursing is a philosophy and professional practice model that can contribute to closing the relevance gap between nursing practice and nursing science. It proposes a...
view of the domain and nature of nursing responsibility, its concepts can be developed and relationships amongst them examined and theories developed. But, only if Careful Nursing becomes a 'must have' model for professional practice and increases public satisfaction with nursing practice, would its full development, both philosophically and theoretically, become worthwhile.

**Relevance to clinical practice**

The Careful Nursing philosophy and professional practice model provides a structure, processes and values for nursing practice, supports nurses’ control over their practice and can be used in all types of practice areas and settings. It is consistent with the principles of nursing shared governance (Dunbar et al. 2007) and could strengthen the implementation of shared governance, especially through the dimension of trustworthy collaboration. Nurses report that implementation of the practice competence and excellence dimensions enables them to re-establish and document clearly their discipline-specific responsibilities for patient care in multi-disciplinary contexts and that this, in turn, strengthens their professional self-confidence (Murphy 2011). The use of nursing standardised languages can dramatically change nurses from an almost exclusive focus on medical diagnoses and procedures to a focus that gives prominence to their professional nursing responsibilities (Jones et al. 2010, Murphy 2010). Such experiences support nurses in the important process of establishing more clearly their professional practice boundaries in multidisciplinary healthcare settings (McNamara et al. 2011).

The relationship between the Careful Nursing concepts of the therapeutic milieu and practice competence and excellence balances two long-standing themes in nursing practice; ‘tenderness and technique’ (Meyer 1960, p. 1); that is, between the personal disposition of nurses and their knowledge and technical skill. Further, in contemporary healthcare settings, increasingly dominated by critically important but often alienating machines and cost-cutting measures that can be dehumanising, Careful Nursing provides an essential corrective by supporting nurses’ enduring role in fostering and modelling respect for the innate dignity and worth of all

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**Table 4** Management of practice and influence in health systems concept and its three dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management or practice and influence in health systems</th>
<th>The initiative nurses take in planning and managing patient care in health systems through support of nursing practice and through particular types of relationships with other healthcare personnel.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support of nursing practice</td>
<td>Nurses’ engagement in supporting and augmenting implementation of the therapeutic milieu and practice competence and excellence concepts at all organisational levels, and including their own professional development related to these concepts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthy collaboration</td>
<td>Nurses’ relationships with other health professionals and healthcare administrators wherein they often take the initiative in addressing patient needs and problems. They are respected and depended on to respond to needs with perceptiveness, prudent judgement and fortitude. Problems are addressed with patience, respectfulness and an eye to the enhancement of human relations. Questioning of situations or methods is done with ‘exquisite tact’ and always with determination to act in patients’ best interest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participative–authoritative management</td>
<td>Nurses’ relationships with nursing or care assistants and other assistive healthcare personnel wherein assistants work according to the directions of professional nurses who have authoritative responsibility for assistants’ care of patients. Nurses participate with assistants to some extent in order to model how to carry out tasks with skill and attitudes which reflect caritas, contagious calmness and great tenderness in all things.</td>
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**Table 5** Professional authority concept and its two dimensions

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<tr>
<th>Professional authority</th>
<th>Encompasses the power, relative autonomy, intellectual and political influence as well as the respect that professional nurses are accorded within healthcare systems and society at-large because they provide their distinctive service very well. This recognition helps nurses to grow in professional self-confidence and visibility and, in turn, enhances further their development of professional knowledge and skill.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Professional self-confidence</td>
<td>Nurses’ strong, yet gracious and unassuming, sense of professional affirmation that arises from providing a skilled and valuable public service. It is reinforced by their deep commitment to their professional values and skills and conviction that there is very little in the domain of nursing service that they cannot accomplish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional visibility</td>
<td>Recognition of the nursing profession at all levels of society for its distinct and effective contribution to healing and health. In contemporary society it includes nurses’ willingness to contribute to the professional literature and lay press and engage in media and other public debates on health issues.</td>
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persons. It calls nurses’ attention to what this role means for them in terms of their care for themselves and one another as professional nurses as well as for how they engage in relationships with patients.

Careful Nursing offers a perspective on the much-discussed nature of the spiritual in nursing practice. It does not guide nurses to focus on spiritual assessments, diagnoses and interventions, although these could emerge naturally in practice. Rather, through the dimensions of caritas, contagious calmness and great tenderness in all things, it proposes that the spiritual aspect of human life permeates nurse–patient relationships and is at the heart of how nurses practice. This perspective is consistent with the view that nurses can provide spiritual care by being aware of their own spiritual nature and that of their patients (Ellis & Narayanasamy 2009) and with research indicating that spiritual care occurs naturally in attentive nurse–patient relationships (Carr 2008). Whilst the model presupposes the existence of an infinite transcendent reality, it also allows for the fact that nurses’ personal understanding of the spiritual ranges along a psycho-spiritual continuum, which can extend from a humanist or atheistic understanding where the spiritual is understood as purely psychological (Costello 2009), to a deeply religious understanding where an infinite transcendent reality is profoundly acknowledged.

Hospital nursing departments in the US (Weldon 2009, Clayton 2010, Ellerbe (2011) and Ireland (McMullin et al. 2009) are finding the philosophical assumptions and model concepts relevant to practice. They are also being used to inspire a particular nursing practice model in a large healthcare system (Goedken 2011). The idea of creating a therapeutic milieu for patients is attractive because of its potential for counteracting stress and promoting safety. Contagious calmness is invariably the most popular dimension of the therapeutic milieu because nurses find that just remembering the idea helps them to feel and act calmly. The effectiveness of contagious calmness in managing stressful acute care settings, originally described by Proudfoot (1983), has been more recently confirmed by Borgatti (2003). Nurses’ care for themselves and one another has been identified as an important prerequisite in implementing Careful Nursing (Goedken & Rocklage 2010). Together with caritas and contagious calmness, it can strengthen nurses’ ability to recognise their own innate dignity and worth and enhance their disposition to look upon themselves and one another with compassion and kindness. This could help to counter the international problem of bullying amongst nurses (Johnson 2009). Cleary et al. (2010) also emphasise the importance of ‘cultivating an environment in which nurses treat each other with dignity and respect’ (p. 335).

Finally, the potential of Careful Nursing for nurse-led transformation of healthcare settings depends on nurses taking the initiative to engage all healthcare personnel in understanding its philosophy and concepts. Nurses’ trustworthy collaboration with other professionals and participative–authoritative relationships with healthcare assistants and supportive personnel can enhance the work satisfaction of all and contribute further to patients’ overall satisfaction with the care they receive.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the author.

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