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## From the editor

Nursing's development has been intimately tied to the role of wife and mother in the "family" of the health care system. As an occupational group, we have been viewed by society as women who take care of and nurture the dependent sick, and who serve the requirements of the "father" physician. One outgrowth of an unquestioning acceptance of this family metaphor is the use of metaphors of human development to describe the development of nursing science and nursing knowledge. Nursing science is thought of as *embryonic*, *in its infancy*, and *underdeveloped* in comparison with more well-established, *developed* disciplines. The flaw in this logic is that we fail to question the standard of comparison against which we judge our own knowledge.

Even though Nightingale conceptualized nursing as a profession growing from the societally prescribed women's role of caring for the sick, she warned against nursing becoming the submissive, wifely equivalent of the woman's role in the family. In her closing note in *Notes on Nursing*, she cautions women against listening to "voices from without,"<sup>1(p135)</sup> which required either doing what men do because men do it, or doing what women do because it is prescribed for women. Eight years before she published the *Notes on Nursing*, she wrote a cutting critique of the family in *Cassandra*. If we reflect on this passage as a metaphor for nursing within the family of the health care system, it becomes a startling prophesy of nursing's oppression and the stunted growth of our identity as a scientific discipline.

The family? It is too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit, be that spirit male or female . . .

The family uses people, *not* for what they are, not for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants them for—for its own uses. It thinks of them not as what God has made them, but as the something which *it* has arranged that they shall be. If it wants some one to sit in the drawing-room,

*that* some one is to be supplied by the family, though that member may be destined for science, or for education, or for active superintendence by God, i.e. by the gifts within.

This system dooms some minds to incurable infancy, others to silent misery.

And the family boasts that it has performed its mission well, in as far as it has enabled the individual to say, "I have *no* peculiar work, nothing but what the moment brings me, nothing that I cannot throw up at once at anybody's claim"; in as far, that is, as it has *destroyed* the individual life. And the individual thinks that a great victory has been accomplished, when, at last, she is able to say that she has "no personal desires or plans." What is this but throwing the gifts of God aside as worthless, and substituting for them those of the world?<sup>2(pp37-38)</sup>

Despite significant advances in nursing literature and recent strides in describing and defining our peculiar work, our identity remains sadly obscured, even from our own vision. It is notable that in our discussions of what nursing and nursing science are, we consistently refer to what medicine is, and we use this knowledge as a basis for stating what nursing is *not*. Whether we are extending, rebelling, or changing, we implicitly accept medicine as our starting point. Jean Baker Miller has proposed an explanation for this phenomenon in terms of subordination and dominance. She states that people who are subordinate "know more about the dominants than they know about themselves. If a large part of your fate depends on accommodating to and pleasing the dominants, you concentrate on them. Indeed, there is little purpose in knowing yourself. Why should you when your knowledge of the dominants determines your life?"<sup>3(p11)</sup>

For too long we have failed to face the reality of our subordination, and the ultimate negative effect on nursing knowledge and nursing practice. It is time for nursing to move away from the oppressive dominance of the "health care family." The family and the system need not be one and the same. The

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family metaphor as a professional imperative "dooms some minds to incurable infancy, others to silent misery."<sup>(p37)</sup> Let us develop the consciousness and courage to know, speak, and act nursing's own wisdom and knowledge.

#### REFERENCES

1. Nightingale F: *Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not*. Unabridged republication of the first Ameri-

can edition as published in 1860. New York, Dover Publications, Inc, 1969.

2. Nightingale F: *Cassandra* (with an introduction by Myra Stark and an epilogue by Cynthia Macdonald), Old Westbury, NY, The Feminist Press, 1980.
3. Miller JB: *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1976.

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