4.2: Early Nurse Leaders in Canadian Health Care

Nurses have played an important role in the health of Canadians for over 400 years. The history of nursing in Canada began with Marie Rollet Hébert, the wife of an apothecary from Europe who settled in what is now Quebec City. She assisted her husband in providing care for the early settlers from 1617 until her death in 1649. Gregory and colleagues describe how she consulted with Indigenous peoples regarding healing methods (Gregory, Raymond-Seniuk, Patrick, & Stephen, 2015). They also recount how she educated Indigenous children and quickly became known as “Canada's first teacher.”

The first Hôtel-Dieu in New France, still in existence today, was established in 1639 by three sisters of Augustines de la Miséricorde de Jésus in Quebec City to care for both the spiritual and physical needs of their patients. Jeanne Mance, known as Canada’s first lay nurse (CNA, 2013), had both medical and surgical skills. She arrived on Montreal Island from France in 1642 and established a hospital the following year (Gregory et al., 2015). In 1659, she recruited three sisters from the Hospital Sisters of Saint-Joseph in France to assist with running the Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal (Noel, 2008). She is credited with co-founding the city of Montreal.

The founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company accelerated the growth of commerce and trade between the Europeans and the Indigenous population of Canada. However, the Europeans brought much more than traders, settlers, and education to Canada. During the seventeenth century, a smallpox epidemic killed almost half of the Huron people (CNA, 2013) and the services of the European lay nurses were in great demand.

In 1747, Marie-Marguerite (Dufrost de Lajemmarais) d’Youville led a lay group of women to take charge of the bankrupt Hôpital Général de Montréal. They turned it into a hospice for aged men and women, orphans, and “fallen” women. This group of women became known as the Grey Nuns in 1755 (Jaenen, 2008). Marie-Marguerite d’Youville was the first Canadian to be canonized and was named a saint in 1990 (CNA, 2013).

The nineteenth century was a time of rapid advances in both health care and nursing education. Almost concurrently
with the publication of Florence Nightingale’s *Notes on Nursing* in 1859, Louis Pasteur published a paper suggesting that human and animal diseases are caused by micro-organisms (CNA, 2013). Canadian nursing expertise grew rapidly as the first graduates from the Nightingale Training School began working in 1865 and the first Canadian graduates from the Mack Training School for Nurses started working in 1878. The first two professional male nurses in Canada graduated from the Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing (Halifax) in 1892 (CNA, 2013).

Rapid changes to the North American frontier also took place during the nineteenth century. The British North America Act formally established the Dominion of Canada, composed of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, with John A. Macdonald elected as the first prime minister in 1867. Between the years of 1870 and 1898, Manitoba, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories, and the Yukon Territory joined Canada. The completion of Canada’s first transcontinental railway in 1885 linked these vast expanses of land together as one country and brought settlers into the open lands of the west.

The rapid opening of the Canadian west to settlement brought to light a shortage of health care providers and hospitals in the isolated western communities. Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, wife of Canada’s Governor General, wrote about the “pathetic stories” she heard, “where young mothers and children had died, whilst husbands and fathers were traveling many weary miles for the medical and nursing aid, which might have saved them” (VON Canada, 2017). Lady Aberdeen was asked by the National Council of Women to establish an order of visiting nurses to travel to areas without medical or health services and establish small “cottage” hospitals. This order of nurses was to be founded in honour of the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria’s ascent to the throne. Amazingly, parliamentary support for the order wavered because of opposition from Canadian doctors.

However, Lady Aberdeen accepted the challenge and, despite resistance, The Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) was established in late 1897, with Lady Aberdeen the inaugural president.

*Figure 4.1.1 Lady Aberdeen Established VON to Provide Health Services in Rural and Remote Communities*
[May 1897], “Countess of Aberdeen in Queen’s U Robes Topley,” by William James Topley (1845-1930), photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada under the reproduction reference number PA-027869 and under the MIKAN ID number 3194681, released in the Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons. About this photo: The Countess of Aberdeen (née Ishbel Maria Marjoribanks) in the robes which she wore when she received an honorary L.L.D. from Queen’s University, the first time an honorary degree was conferred on a woman by a Canadian university.

The VON’s first tasks included the provision of visiting nursing services to areas without medical facilities and the establishment of small “cottage” hospitals in isolated areas of the west. The VON Canada nurses were immediately dispersed to rural and remote areas across Canada. In 1898, four VON Canada nurses travelled with military and government officials to the Klondike in the Yukon where during the gold rush many prospectors were suffering from a typhoid epidemic. VON Canada sites were opened in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Halifax, and Kingston, and the first “cottage” hospital was established in Regina to care for the early prairie settlers.

Figure 4.1.2 The First Hospital in Regina, Saskatchewan
[1889], photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Photographic Services Collection, collection number R-B10796, is released in the Public Domain. About this photo: Regina’s first hospital was in the home of Mary Truesdell, located on 11th Avenue and McInytre Street.

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**Essential Learning Activity 4.1.1**

For further insight into the response of physicians to the establishment of the VON, watch this short Heritage Minutes video on "Cottage Hospitals" (2:00), produced by Historica Canada.