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The past is our future

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ABSTRACT: 2017 is arguably a very exciting time for the Veterinary Nursing profession. There has never been a better time to be involved. This raises the question of why the history of the profession does not form part of its curriculum. The author discusses why an awareness of the history of veterinary nursing is essential to know it in order to look to the future of the profession, and how inspiring a new generation of nurses will ultimately secure the future of the profession.

Keywords: History; future; education

A shared history

Everyone has a distinct history, such as their ancestry which is part of who they are. There is also a history they choose to become a part of, such as a profession or sports team. This amalgamation of identities must be understood as it becomes an integral part of social identity and how people interact with their own group. For example, a football fan may have a casual interest in watching football and supporting Manchester United. However, another football fan, attending many matches, knowing the history of the team and remembering the famous goal by Ryan Giggs in the 1999 FA cup semi-final, would feel invested in Manchester United. The author is particularly interested in the history of medicine, nursing and veterinary nursing and why they are important for the contemporary veterinary nurse (VN).

The name Florence Nightingale resonates with most people, but who was she? According to Biography (n.d.) she was born in 1820 and grew up feeling it was her duty to pursue nursing despite an unpopular opinion of the profession. In Victorian times it was perceived as a menial labour job. Additionally, women had limited rights, were not able to own land and were expected to marry to secure an upper-class status. It is a testament to her character that she defied her parents' wishes and enrolled as a nursing student in 1850. Four years later during the Crimean War, Nightingale and a team of nurses made it their mission to improve hygiene standards in hospitals for the British troops. Prior to this, more people were dying from infection than they were from injury. She cut the mortality rate by two-thirds, received the "Nightingale Brooch" from Queen Victoria and literally changed how hospitals were designed in the future. No longer was nursing seen as for the lower classes; nursing became an honourable vocation, thanks to her.

In medicine there have been profound, life-changing discoveries in the last century.

According to Bud (2011), penicillin, the first antibiotic, was discovered accidentally by Alexander Fleming in 1928 after experimenting with mould. He was about to throw away a Petri dish contaminated with the *Penicillium* mould, but noticed it displayed antibacterial properties, so he reproduced it. By the end of the Second World War it was being produced in large quantities and was heralded as the wonder drug that cured syphilis, pneumonia and gangrene. However, the abuse of penicillin was noticed as early as the 1950s, which saw the emergence of resistant bacteria and so alternatives such as methicillin were used. However, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) emerged and became pandemic by the 1990s, leading to the antibiotic crisis of modern times.

Turner (1984) reflects on how small animal practice was not accepted as being part of veterinary medicine until after the Second World War. He remembers the formation of the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) by 30 (all women) attendees and a year later the name temporarily changed to the British Animal Nursing Auxiliary Association (BANAA) due to the title of nurse being protected and that of veterinary nurse not yet existing. Turner recalls confronting the General Nursing Council and Ministry of Health in 1971 to question the demeaning title of "auxiliary"; however, he was once again thwarted as the title "nurse" was protected and related only to nursing

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humans. Turner realised that registered auxiliary nursing assistants (RANAs) were viewed no differently than someone without qualifications and felt devalued by this. The article ends with a hopeful overview of how far the profession had thus come, establishing the nurse as a valuable part of the profession. It is poignant that just five months after the article was published, on 1 November 1984, the first use of the title Veterinary Nurse is used.

Why is this important?

Imagine the black community not knowing about the 1963 speech by Martin Luther King Jr which called for civil and economic rights. Imagine the LGBTQ community not knowing how the 1969 Stonewall riots led to decriminalisation of homosexuality and the first gay pride movement. Many more victories followed these important events, and built on them like the foundation of a house. Veterinary nursing is no different. It is essential to understand the context and starting point of any argument to build a secure foundation to promote change. The veterinary world has changed drastically in the last 50 years thanks to the hard work of many individuals. In turn, a new generation of nurses will be thankful for the continued effort in protecting their future. It is aptly put in Johnson (2017), "We need to know our past to be able to secure our future".

Where is the profession right now?

There is a problem currently facing the profession: there are not enough VNs (Kidd, 2015). Despite the number of VNs increasing every year, they are still insufficient to meet the demand of a growing profession. Worryingly, the average age of a VN is little older than 30, with many leaving the profession. Several factors have been implicated such as low pay, stress and feeling unvalued with no sense of career progression (Kidd, 2015). The number of training practices appears to be the bottleneck for new students as this is a finite number. Jill Macdonald highlights this: "We can train as many nurses as we like, but if they don't stay in vet nursing, we are constantly battling against VN shortage in practice" (Editorial, 2015). The VN Futures project hopes to address this by developing a VN schools' council which will allow VNs to give an informed opinion towards their own education (Vet Futures, 2016a).

Ballantyne (Vet Futures, 2016a) discusses how nurses seem to find difficulty in talking about themselves and promoting their profession. It is clear nursing has a subservient background of being told what to do and perhaps this feeling continues to this day in some practices. Ninety-eight percent of the profession is female and Ballantyne cites Sandberg (Vet Futures, 2016b) on women in the workplace that they seem to "consistently fail to push themselves forward, seldom negotiate pay and often counteract professional praise by shifting it to someone else". The author wonders whether this issue is simply a lack of understanding of the history of the profession, through no fault of any individual and nothing to do with gender differences. The author can relate to this, being male in a female-dominated profession. Less than a year ago he had no idea that just 2% of the profession was male and lacked any knowledge of the other issues of today. Thanks to the VN Futures project the author has been inspired to do research and become more involved in the future of the profession.

Most will remember the recent petition to protect the VN title. Although there was a disappointing outcome, the petition gained 37,000 signatures, which is incredible. That is nearly double the number of RVNs and SVNs combined (Vet Futures, 2016a). But it is by no means a wasted, venture as it lit a fire in many nurses and according to *VN Times* (Editorial 2016a), VNs were galvanised and are more than ever asking "What can I do?"

Looking to the future

Waters (2017) discusses how nurses' talents can be optimised and that the question of what can they do still persists. The recent survey conducted by the RCVS as part of the VN Futures project sought to find some answers and assess what needs changing in the current legislation or what needs clarification. It may well be that in a Brexit future the role VNs play may have to expand if there are vet shortages, highlighted by another survey (Woodmansey, 2017). Kernot (2017) spoke with Liz Cox about the schedule 3 survey predicting RVNs may be able to undertake more responsibilities. These could include: controlling depth of anaesthesia, dentistry, cat castration and prescribing preventative POM-V treatment for patients under the vets' care.

There are some inspiring nurses who have influenced the author through their accomplishments. Kernot (2016) spoke with Jane Davidson about her presence on social media and her engagement with the community. Jane realised there was a lack of available information to prospective new pet parents with the internet being an unreliable source. In response, she invented "pre-pet parties" to help educate them on responsible pet ownership. She also has a blog and twitter account, creating the hashtag, #planetRVN.

Animal welfare campaigner Shakira Miles was recently featured in *VNJ* by Sophie Beckwith (2017). She founded The SaveABulls campaign to try and abolish breed-specific legislation and raise awareness of dog-bite prevention. The campaign has its own website and has been popular on social media. She recently won Vet Nurse of the Year at the Ceva Awards for Animal Welfare (Editorial, 2016b).

Conclusion

The author urges VNs to get involved, be inspired and know their history. Join the BVNA and become part of the discussion. The veterinary nursing profession would benefit from an educational system incorporating its proud history so it can be studied accurately, systematically and critically. This would help VNs to overcome the problems of today by creating impassioned nurses of tomorrow.

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