

Betsi Cadwaladyr (1789–1860): the first patient advocate



Elisabeth ‘Betsi’ Cadwaladyr is best known for the role she played while serving in the Crimean War (1853–1856) and is regarded as a role model for fighting to improve patients’ clinical care and living conditions.

Born in 1789, Betsi Cadwaladyr was one of 16 children brought up on Pen Rhiw Farm in Llanycil, near Bala. She grew up in a strongly religious household in North Wales as the daughter of a farmer and Methodist preacher. Her mother died when she was 5 years old. In the tradition of rural communities of Wales at the time, individuals would care for sick neighbours in the hope that if they became sick, neighbours would, in turn, care for them. Nursing skills would thus be acquired among members of the rural community.

Her autobiographer Jane Williams Ysgafell (1857) described Betsi as having a strict, moral sense with large doses of both independence and spontaneity, which led her to run away from home aged 9 and catch thieves twice by the time she reached 14. Aged 14, she escaped from her role as a maid in Bala (where she had learnt to speak English) to run away to Liverpool. She continued to work as a maid and at some point during this time changed her name to Davis as it was easier for others to pronounce. She spent most of her life in domestic service and, unusually for a woman of her class, travelled the world with some of the families she served, including a ship’s captain. During her time on the ship, she is known to have cared for the sick and also deliver babies.

TRAINING AS NURSE IN HER 60S

On her return to UK, and now in her 60s, Betsi moved to London and received formal training as a nurse at Guys Hospital London, completing her training at the age of 65. Betsi was in London when British newspapers began to report on the appalling circumstances sick and wounded British soldiers faced in the Crimean War. She was determined to do something about this and applied to be allowed to travel the Crimea.

Eventually, she was offered a place and made the arduous journey to Scutari in Turkey.

TWO TITANS OF NURSING MEET

It was here that Betsi and Florence Nightingale’s paths first crossed. Nightingale ran the hospital in Scutari Betsi was allocated to. There, Betsi complained vociferously that she had not been given any worthwhile work. There seemed an immediate clash of personalities, which ended with Betsi moving to a Balaclava hospital, near the frontline where the fighting was.

What Betsi faced in Balaclava was appalling. The Crimean War has been characterised as one of the worst managed wars in history, with deaths due to illness and malnutrition at four times the rate of those due to enemy action. Instructions were given to the nurses that at no account were they to speak to the injured soldiers. Betsi was severely scolded for asking one soldier how he was faring. On her first day in the hospital, she encountered a soldier who had frostbite and when Betsi removed the bandages the toes on both feet fell off. The next patient’s hand fell off at the wrist. It transpired that the wounds had not been attended to for more than 6 weeks. As well as frostbite, Betsi encountered maggot-infested wounds and she describes: *“One soldier had been wounded at Alma by a shot which passed through his left breast, above his heart and came out below the shoulder blade. His wound had not been dressed for 5 weeks and I took at least a quart of maggots from it (Williams, 1987).*

IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR WOUNDED SOLDIERS

Betsi goes on to describe that frequently she would place her hand into a wound and remove a fistful of maggots. Betsi set about ensuring the men had clean dressings which were changed frequently and a good diet. She took over the running of the special dietary needs kitchen as well as the wards. She ensured that soldiers were kept fed, watered, cleaned, warmed and at least to some extent valued and loved. It was found



Map of the battlefield of Balaclava

that casualties nurses in that vein survived better than those without nursing. The bureaucracy she faced was very difficult. Betsi publicly denounced the system of gift disposal from the Free Gift Stores. Medical supplies could not be removed from the stores without a requisition signed by a doctor. The procurement system required that requisition had to be made daily. For example, if a soldier was prescribed jelly for his

lunch, one would be provided that day but the next day a new requisition was required and the soldier would receive no further jelly without another requisition. The warehouses were full of clothing and food which had been sent from Britain as part of the war effort. Because of the system in place to distribute provisions, most of the foodstuff went rotten before it could be used. In addition, linen was stored in damp conditions and had to be discarded. Betsi objected to the tyranny of this system and in the hospital in Balaclava, she won the day. She did this by being determined to ensure that medical staff were fully aware of the circumstances the wounded faced. She would take them to the bedside of the soldiers and show them the wounds. Today we might call this a powerful use of patient stories. She was given free and full access to the warehouses and was able to freely distribute provisions.

STARTING DATA COLLECTION

Around the same time, Florence Nightingale started to collect data about mortality, morbidity and infection rates which became seminal work in advancing the role of nursing practice, infection prevention and the role of evidence collection and collation. Although their approaches were very different, Florence later

acknowledge the impact of the work that Betsi had undertaken at Balaclava and the significant improvements it had made in the care of the wounded. The morale of the soldiers was much higher than in other hospitals. They became well-nourished and were nursed in clean sheets, had clean clothes and their wounds were well cared for and dressed frequently.

MAGGOTS — BUT NOT THE GOOD ONES

Today we might think that maggot-infested wounds would fare well. However, maggots currently used in debridement therapy are sterile. This is very different from the maggots found in the wounds in Balaclava, which were from flies that had opportunistically entered the wound and laid larvae perhaps after feeding on faeces (Mumcuoglu, 2001). Nevertheless many still cleaned wounds of debris and necrotic tissue but there were still many instances of infection.

Through her personality and sheer determination Betsi accomplished a great deal in Balaclava and for nurses *per se*. One year before the war ended, Betsi returned home suffering from cholera and dysentery. She died 5 years later on 17 July 1860 and was buried in the pauper's section of Abney Park Cemetery in north London. However, Elizabeth was given a headstone in 2012, with funds raised by the nurses of the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

BETSI'S LEGACY

Betsi is often seen as a great role model for nurses in the way she fought to improve public and patients' health. She is admired for her battles against gratuitous bureaucracy and flawed authority as well as her passion for her soldiers, making sure they had enough to eat and drink, clean clothes, lived in as comfortable surroundings as possible and felt cared for. The largest health organisation in Wales, the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Betsi Cadwaladr), is named after her and Betsi was voted one of "the 50 greatest Welsh men and women of all times."

WUK

REFERENCES

- Mumcuoglu K Y (2001) Clinical applications for maggots in wound care. *American Journal of Clinical Dermatology* 2 (4) 219–27
- Williams J (ed) (1987) *An Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis Betsy Cadwaladr: A Balaclava Nurse*. Honno, Cardiff