



**Let's boost morale of our frontline soldiers *\*published by the Standard Newspaper on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.\****

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) designated the year 2020 as the international year of the nurse and the midwife, the ongoing pandemic was not present or anticipated. However, the Covid-19 challenge has brought into focus the important contribution of nurses and midwives to our health and wellbeing.

This year is the 200<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern day nursing, who was born to British parents in 1820, in the city of Florence, Italy. She lived in the Victorian era during the Crimean war that pitted the British Empire against the Russian Empire. Considering her track record as a nurse in London hospitals, Florence was asked to go to Crimea and provide nursing care to the wounded soldiers in a British base hospital. Every evening she went round the infirmary, checking on the wounded soldiers while carrying a lamp, earning her the name 'The Lady with the Lamp'. Her diligent nursing of wounded soldiers led to the reduction of deaths by two thirds. One of her crucial interventions was improvement of the unsanitary conditions in the hospital which certainly improved outcomes. Upon her return to London, she received a hero's welcome and an award from the Queen. She is also credited for tackling smallpox and cholera outbreaks, establishing the first ever nurse training school and for her professional authorship that revolutionised the nursing profession. Florence Nightingale is recognised in history as an outstanding nurse of all time.

Like our nurses and midwives in the COVID-19 era, Nightingale was a frontline health worker who risked her own life in order to save the lives of others. As soldiers in battle, during this pandemic nurses put their lives at stake in contact tracing of individuals who have been exposed to the coronavirus, receiving patients in health facilities, triaging those who are sick, and providing care to the admitted patients. In addition, specialist nurses in Critical Care provide round the clock nursing care in Intensive Care Units (ICUs). Nurses work under such stressful environments, for long working hours at times with inadequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and witness deaths despite giving their all. It is easy to forget that despite this pandemic, nurses and midwives continue to provide the other essential health care packages including child immunizations, antenatal care services, maternity services as well as the care of patients with other illnesses. No wonder, some nurses suffer from fatigue, burnout and depression.

Unlike other professionals, nurses do not have the luxury of working remotely or working from home. This year's World Health Day marked on 7<sup>th</sup> April was an opportunity to recognize and appreciate the work of nurses and midwives. The Director General of the

WHO, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus delivering his address on that day said “Today is a day to celebrate nurses and midwives, to thank them for everything they do, and to commit ourselves to doing everything we can to support and protect them”. This is a call to action for governments and in indeed to all of us to support nurses and midwives in their work. In other countries, we have seen ordinary citizens expressing their appreciation for the frontline health workers. We have seen people clapping from balconies as they see health care workers pass by, delivering of meals and even providing hotel rooms for them to rest awhile before going back for another long shift. Such words and acts of gratitude go a long way in increasing the morale of soldiers in war. We are at war and healthcare workers are our soldiers.

We can motivate health care workers and enable them to perform even better. The most urgent intervention is ensuring that they have adequate and consistent supply of PPE. We cannot afford to have them the fall ill. Secondly, frontline health workers must be trained on COVID-19 response. Being a new disease, health care workers require proper training on how to safely handle suspected cases; type of PPE to have, the correct way of wearing (donning) and safely removing (doffing) them. Of course, allowances for all frontline health workers would go a long way to cushion them against extra expenses they incur due to reduced transport and eatery services available. Ghana for instance, has rolled out an insurance scheme and a 50% increase in the wages of her frontline health workers for the period March to June 2020. The same is happening in several other countries.

On their own personal protection, testing services for frontline health workers should be availed regularly. The physical safety and security needs of the frontline health workers should also be ensured. It is unfortunate that during contact tracing health workers have faced resistance and violence from communities. Their mental health is also paramount. There is evidence from several countries that COVID-19 is taking a toll on the mental wellness of health workers. This is attributed to burnout due to long working hours, uncertainty about the future of this pandemic, distress in dealing with a large number critically ill patients, lack of PPE and fear of contracting the disease in the line of duty. Closely related is the need to address staff shortages that lead to burnout. Given the uniqueness of their work, a special support system for them will ensure that they are available to do what they vowed to do “be devoted towards the welfare of those committed to my care”.

Importantly, all of us have to take personal and collective responsibility to prevent and stop the spread of the coronavirus. Adherence to the public health guidelines provided remains the surest way to flatten the curve and control the spread of this disease. Self-isolation if one is unwell or is suspicious of infection, social distancing, regularly washing hands and wearing of masks will not only protect and save our lives but also prevent overwhelming our frontline health workers.

The celebration of the International year of the nurse and the midwife could not have come at a better time. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the critical role that nurses play in the battle front, often risking their own lives to save ours. That is why we must salute nurses, midwives and other frontline health workers. You are the true heroes and heroines in the fight against COVID-19!

Nyinyi ndiyo mashujaa wetu wa 2020. We appreciate and celebrate you this year and always.

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