Quality Care: Where We Came From and Where We Must Go

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The focus of this new column will be to showcase innovative work that has advanced quality in areas of practice and care delivery that are of interest to the practicing oncology nurse. Examples include, but are not limited to, practice environment innovation, patient outcomes and experiences of care, team effectiveness, and unit-based or institutionwide system changes.

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The evolution of quality improvement in health care has roots in the work of Florence Nightingale. Working in a Turkish Hospital caring for British soldiers during the Crimean War, Nightingale established the link between sanitation, hygiene, infection, and mortality rates. Informed by her observations of the practice environment and care delivery systems, she implemented interventions corresponding to emerging theories of the spread of infection-causing microorganisms. Her interventions put emphasis on hand hygiene, changing of bed linens, sanitizing surgical instruments, providing proper nutrition, and ensuring fresh, continuous airflow for patients. A forerunner in the measurement of patient outcomes, Nightingale examined the impact of these interventions on infection and mortality over time, demonstrating a decrease in mortality rates from 60% to 1% (Goldie, 1987; Kalisch & Kalisch, 2004). Spreading and sustaining those changes across the system, she used her own evidence to create a safer, more reliable practice environment for a patient population at high risk for infection. Nightingale’s work distinguishes her as a pioneer in developing the fundamentals of quality improvement methods and measurement. Her work leaves nurses and other healthcare providers a powerful legacy for continuously improving the quality of care for patients and families.

The focus on healthcare quality in the United States continued into the 20th century and was marked by the transformation of medical education, government funding of programs supporting maternal child health, and the creation of Medicare and Medicaid. At the same