

# **Celebrating Public Health Lives** **Marisa Cantarelli, *mater et magistra* of nursing discipline**

## **Marisa Cantarelli, *mater et magistra* della disciplina infermieristica**

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Prof. Marisa Cantarelli

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On October 5th, we lost Marisa Cantarelli, a Milanese woman, enlightened bourgeois, nurse, Vice Director of the Scuola Universitaria di Discipline Infermieristiche at the University of Milan, and a renowned Italian theorist in Nursing Science. For many of her young students at the University of Milan, she has been *a mater et magistra* of the nursing discipline, and her scientific contribution has spread nationally and internationally, continuing to guide us in the future.

We still remember her firm yet respectful character, when, in Via Sassi, in front of the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, she invited Maura to join the Scuola Universitaria di Discipline Infermieristiche. When the young nurse responded that she believed her skills were better suited for hospital management, Cantarelli did not get upset or discouraged, but smiled warmly and said, “Have faith in your abilities and give it a try.” Thus a long period of synergy began, during which the student learned from the teacher nursing knowledge and strategies for professional development, in a period of great excitement. Not only did the teacher convey care for researchers and faculty dedicated to science, but she also promoted the values of courage, honesty, healthy ambition, and affection for the new generations in growth.

Cantarelli shared that she left her native city of Milan after World War II, choosing to become a nurse in Rome at the Italian Red Cross in 1950. Facing a challenging hospital environment with wards holding hundreds of patients and no other trained staff besides herself, she began to question how to improve nursing care in Italy.

The memory of the happiest period of her professional career, as Edoardo Manzonei wrote in his eulogy for Marisa Cantarelli, was when she returned to her city and began to catch a daily train to the provincial areas of the Adda region, where a bicycle awaited her. As a public health nurse, she rode through the countryside to care for people in what is now considered cutting-edge practice.

She also told us about her experience at the Nursing School at Magenta Hospital, which she reluctantly left later, to accept a position at the University of Milan, where she would spend the rest of her life. She became Vice Director of the Scuola Universitaria di Discipline Infermieristiche at the University of Milan, which she founded with Professor Giovanardi and managed from 1975 to 1999, collaborating closely with Professor Fara and Deans Professor Scala and Professor Coggi.

From that intense period, her writings remain, preserved in the books called Quaderni della Scuola Universitaria di Discipline Infermieristiche. In the early years of her leadership, Cantarelli distinguished herself in the scientific community by organizing the first Italian conference on the nursing discipline and presenting, for the first time in Italy, a theoretical model of nursing care.

While several Anglo-American theories and conceptual models were already present in the literature and taught at the Schools of Nursing in the 1980s, Italy lacked a theory derived from scientific research and the country’s socio-health context. Cantarelli’s “Theoretical Model of Nursing Performances” took shape through the studies and research of faculty and students under her guidance, based on the analysis of nursing activities in clinical practice conducted by nurses from various hospital and community settings.

Her idea of starting from clinical practice remains a fundamental aspect of nursing science today and forms the foundation of evidence-based practice. The result of this analysis led to the classification of nursing activities according to the type of nursing care needs. Different nursing care needs were identified in the Model, and coordinated

nursing care actions were established in response to these needs, resulting in specific nursing performances. The Model's application required clinical reasoning to diagnose the need and level of dependency of the person in need, make decisions about the nursing actions to be taken, and evaluate the outcome achieved for the person.

The Model, presented by Cantarelli at conferences and in publications, was adopted as a conceptual framework in the training of nursing degree courses at various Italian universities, where it is still in use today. In clinical practice, it has been implemented as a guide for nursing documentation in hospitals and as a framework for continuing education for nurses. In research, it has been used as a reference framework for identifying the health needs of the population. In nursing management, it has been adopted as a foundation for improving the quality of nursing care in hospitals and in the community. The Model was disseminated nationally and internationally through publications, texts, and conferences.

Cantarelli devoted herself with determination to the University School in Milan, focusing on developing nursing leadership and generating new conceptual frameworks for nursing care related to the functions of care, teaching, management, and research. The nursing leadership role at different levels of the health system was outlined according to the Mintzberg professional model, fostering the establishment of the nursing service in hospitals and the subsequent legislative recognition of its leadership role.

The educational function was realized in the preparation of faculty capable of designing and managing educational programs. However, Cantarelli focused primarily on the evidence from nursing research to demonstrate, within academia, the birth and development of the nursing scientific discipline and the need for its formal recognition among other disciplines. This goal was achieved, with the help of various synergies, through the legislative approval of the first scientific disciplinary sector for nursing sciences.

Cantarelli's students went on to hold significant roles in various areas of leadership, association, and academia. For several years, she frequently reunited them to align and update their knowledge and skills. As her students and faculty, we experienced Cantarelli's firmness, courage, and foresight as a promoter of the cultural and scientific development of the nursing profession, both in universities and national and international associations. Cantarelli dedicated years to research and teaching with an innovative vision always centered on the needs of the people being cared for.

She authoritatively expressed her divergent thinking when facing obstacles to the development of the discipline, posed by both internal and external forces. She was also a member of the Ethics Committee at the University of Milan.

She authored numerous publications and books on nursing sciences throughout her career and beyond. Her students, along with many nurses across our country, remember her university life and beyond with the greatest gratitude for the personal and professional growth she helped them achieve.

In recognition of her contributions, the University of Milan, together with other associations, proposed a prestigious recognition. In 2013, the Rector of the University of Milan awarded her an honorary degree in Nursing and Midwifery for her significant contributions to the field.

In December 2022, the City of Milan awarded her its highest honor, the "Ambrogino d'Oro", for her relentless dedication.

Marisa Cantarelli has left her student Maura, the nursing discipline at the University of Milan, and all nurses with a solid disciplinary, scientific, and cultural legacy, along with a professional life model of great value that will remain in our minds and hearts forever.

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## **Addendum by the Editor In Chief of “Annali di Igiene, Medicina Preventiva e di Comunità”**

While covering the role of Editor in Chief of this Journal since 1986, I will never forget that I spent quite a long period of my professional life at the State University of Milan, as a student from 1952 to 1958, and as a Faculty member, with growing roles, in the Medical School, from 1959 until 1986. After 1970, as “second Chair” of Hygiene, I helped my mentor, Prof Augusto Giovanardi, Director, and Marisa Cantarelli (Deputy Director) in the management of the “Special School in Nursing Disciplines”, a teaching organization for nurses with the role of preparing the University to deliver the regular Degrees of first (3 years) and second (2 additional years) level. In 1974 I succeeded as Director, after my mentor’s retirement, but always keeping in mind that the director of the school was necessarily a professor in Medicine only because, at that time, there were neither nurses holding a university degree nor a single nurse holding a full professorship: therefore, Cantarelli and myself collaborated very well together also because I left to her entirely – no exceptions - the specific choices regarding the profession. By the way, Cantarelli was not only an outstanding and authoritative nurse, but also a sophisticated mind, as the two authors of the above article, both now full professors of nursing, have explained in a convincing way.

To document the rich and multifaceted mind of Marisa Cantarelli, I remember that she was introduced to, and enthusiastically accepted by, the Soroptimist Club “Milano the Founder” (the first of its kind in Italy), a kind of Rotary Club reserved to Lady-professionals, where she became very active, served as President, and affirmed the professional role of nurses, including the ability of those well trained to manage complex sections of hospital organization, to do research and to offer teaching at university level.

After my move from the State University of Milan to the Sapienza University of Rome in 1986, my place was taken in sequence by two Deans of the Medical School, and their efforts in helping Marisa Cantarelli went on until a series of events took place, which made it really possible for a student to become a university-graduated nurse (University Diploma in 1991); in 2001 the diploma became a three-years university degree (in “nursing”, sufficient to practice); and in 2004, adding two years

of advanced courses, opened the “magistral degree” in “nursing sciences”, necessary for teaching, research and management and also a pre-requisite for competitions to start the Academic career as University Researcher.

Simultaneously, in the list of disciplines to be thought in the universities, three additional disciplines were added (Nursing science – general, clinical and pediatric: M/45; Nursing sciences in Obstetrics and Gynecology: M/47; Nursing and technical sciences in Neuro-psychiatry and Rehabilitation: M/48), and for owners of the the magistral degree the possibility to compete for the positions of Researcher, and later of Associate and Full Professor.

Therefore, at the opening of the new millennium, the “long march” of nurses reached the finish line, transforming them from passive executors of orders given by medical doctors, to independent professionals, with their own baggage of competencies, ready to cooperate with the medical components in the interest of the patients. Prepared until now in the Schools of Medicine (but where Specialization Courses, Masters and PhDs in Nursing already exist), we expect nurses to move to Schools of Nursing, where only Researchers, Associate and Full Professors of Nursing will be active, teaching not only in regular courses, but also in their Masters and PhDs. The biggest criticality, now, regards the number of such figures in the Italian Universities, that is still outrageously low: within MED/45, full professors are just 10, associate professors 32, Reserchers 40; for MED/47, respectively, 0, 2, 3; for MED/48: 8, 16, 23. Less than one specific teacher per course, in the whole Italy!

All of us are aware that a large part of the merit of the happy end goes to women like Marisa Cantarelli, who strongly believed in the theory and practice of nursing, who were successful in imposing their vision in the panorama of public health of our Country; but – irony of fate! – Marisa Cantarelli never obtained a University Degree in Nursing nor served in the University as an Associate or Full Professor, because she retired due to age before such degrees were opened and the professorships in Nursing were established. Fortunately, this anomaly was cancelled by the Rector of the University of Milan, who in 2013 awarded Marisa Cantarelli an honorary degree.

At the end of this paper, we hope to have contributed to adequately celebrate the profile of Marisa, a great nurse and a woman of science, an example for all those who aspire to follow this noble profession.

As Saint Paul stated at the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:7), Marisa, at the end of yours, you can say that “you have fought - and won - the good fight, you have finished the race, and you have kept - intact - your faith”.

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