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"Honor Thy Nurse": Establishing a Nursing Honor Guard (HG)

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Purpose: To recognize men and women who have dedicated their professional lives to nursing, and to pay homage to fellow nurses at the end of life's journey, for the commitment they demonstrated in caring for the vulnerable.

Background: Shelley Willette, a Nephrology R.N., had researched starting an HG that would emulate tributes done by military, police and firemen for their fallen peers. When she passed unexpectedly, her renal colleagues made her dream a reality. In her honor, we call our HG "Shelley's Watch".

Method: An HG pays homage to any local retired or active N.P., R.N., or L.P.N. at the time of their death. Current and retired nurses volunteer their time as part of the HG. Services are individualized based on the wishes of the deceased or family, and include reciting "The Nightingale Tribute" (developed by the Kansas State Nurses Association), "She Was There" by Duane Jaeger, RN, MSN, and Final Call to Duty. During these tributes, a porcelain Nightingale lamp with a white candle is lit in the nurses' honor. When the nurse does not respond to a third and final call, they are relieved of their earthly duties, and asked to rest in peace. The candle is extinguished and the lamp is presented to the family along with roses to signify the nurses' devotion to his or her profession. A casket or entryway HG may be done as well. Tributes are offered at the funeral home, church/house of worship, cemetery, private home or other venue. HG members wear any combination of navy blue and white nursing uniforms, scrubs, or dress clothes. Members reciting the tributes are asked to wear a white nurse's uniform and cap, along with a vintage (or replicated) nurses' cape.

Results: The HG has been called upon for 16 services. We continue to adjust and improve our services. Our membership includes over 289 members.

Conclusions: The HG's presence gives meaningful recognition to the nurse who has passed, and helps ease mourner's grief during their time of loss. Nurses who are members of the HG consider it an honor and a privilege to participate in final services for their colleagues.

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