

*From the Baltimore Sun*

# **Nurses' achievements merit international recognition**

By Kristine Gebbie and Sandy Summers

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On Sunday, the world will recognize extraordinary human achievement with the awarding of six Nobel Prizes, including the 2006 Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

No nurse has ever won. That is appropriate, because nursing, while closely related to medicine, is a distinct health science. However, there is no Nobel Prize or comparable annual award (such as a Templeton Prize or a Fields Medal) in nursing. There should be.

Nurses deserve such international recognition. Alfred Nobel's will provided for prizes in Physics; Chemistry; Physiology or Medicine; Literature; and what we now call the Peace Prize. Nobel also specified that the prizes were to be awarded annually to those who had "conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." Nurses certainly meet that standard.

Modern nurses have changed the world. Nursing is an independent science that awards doctoral degrees, and nurses have long been on the forefront of health research and practice in many key areas. Nurses have improved community health, often by reinventing existing health systems or creating new ones. They have increased breast-feeding among critically ill newborns, led efforts to understand and remedy domestic violence, and greatly improved the management of life-threatening pain.

In short, nursing leaders have saved and improved countless lives through innovations that have often cut against the grain of formerly accepted practice.

Consider the example of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), the fierce, brilliant British nurse. Nightingale's pioneering statistical research, sanitary reforms and structural innovations revolutionized the operation of hospitals, military health care and public health systems worldwide.

Or think of Mary Breckinridge (1881-1965), who founded American nurse-midwifery. She established the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky, which has saved the lives of numerous mothers and children and served as a global model for rural health care delivery.

Among worthy living nurses, consider Susie Kim, the Korean who has pioneered new psychiatric treatments and cost-effective mental health centers for the developing world. Or Elizabeth Ngugi, the Kenyan who has saved countless lives by changing how AIDS care is delivered and studied in ostracized communities.

Who cares whether nurses win international prizes? We all should. The world is struggling with the lethal effects of a nursing shortage, and the related migration of nurses away from the neediest countries - due in part to a lack of understanding of the nature and value of the profession. The recognition that comes with

such prizes could greatly benefit the public's health by proclaiming to the world, from preschoolers to national leaders, that nursing is one of the most vital fields of human endeavor.

One avenue for greater recognition of nursing would be to rename the existing Physiology or Medicine Prize as the "Health Prize." This could broaden its scope to include nursing and other fields that make key contributions to global health.

However, the Physiology or Medicine Prize has typically been given to those engaged in research at the cellular level. The 2006 prize, awarded to biomedical researchers Andrew Z. Fire and Craig C. Mello for their discovery of gene silencing by double-stranded RNA, is a good example. Such research provides some key foundational information for health care, and honoring it is consistent with the specific provision in Nobel's will that the prize should go to the person who has "made the most important discovery" within the named life science fields. However, that focus also means the prize does not generally go to those who effect systemic change, such as public health workers and many leading nurses.

But if there were an international prize for nursing, shouldn't there be global prizes for social work, architecture, music and computer science? By all means, yes. In fact, the Nobel Prizes already have adapted: The economics prize - technically the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel - was not added until 1968.

Some institution of global influence should honor nursing, whose leaders are clearly among those who have "conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." Recognition through a Nobel Prize in nursing would strengthen the nursing profession and help resolve the world's critical nursing shortage.

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