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## Public Health

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## Celebrating public health lives: Betsi Cadwaladr

“Happily for the patients, there were among the volunteers some women of strict principle, possessing sufficient judgement and energy to share their several courses, and to work out their own notions of duty. Force of character won for them the confidence of the medical officers, and thus their opportunities of usefulness were increased. To such women, and among them to Elizabeth [Betsi] Cadwaladr (Davis), the gratitude of their country is due forever. She did, as the direction paper of one of our metropolitan hospitals expresses it ‘assist in promoting, by every means in her power, the well-being of the patients.’”<sup>1</sup>

In 2009, it was decided to name the University Health Board that provides NHS services to North Wales, a region of the UK with 700,000 inhabitants, after Betsi Cadwaladr. In August 2012, an official service was held at Abney Park Graveyard, London, where the Welsh nurse had been buried in an unmarked grave in 1860.<sup>2</sup> A memorial, paid for by money raised by the Health Board, was dedicated to her.

So who was Betsi Cadwaladr and what public health contribution did she make? Betsi was born in 1789 in the North Wales town of Bala.<sup>2</sup> Dafydd Cadwaladr, Betsi's father, earned his living as a tenant farmer and travelling preacher. It has been reported that Betsi was a headstrong child that he found difficult to control.<sup>2</sup> So it is not surprising, perhaps, that at the age of nine years, Betsi ran away—in this case to the home of Reverend Simon Lloyd and his wife, where she was allowed to stay on as a servant; Rev Lloyd taught Betsi how to read, write and play the harp.<sup>3</sup>

However, not long after, Betsi decided to run off again—this time to Liverpool, where she found employment as a housemaid with a wealthy family.<sup>2</sup> It is understood that she changed her surname to Davis as Cadwaladr could not be easily pronounced by English people (N.B. Cadwaladr and Cadwaladr are alternative spellings of the same surname). While she was in their service, she travelled abroad, including to Waterloo in 1815; the spectacle of the dead and dying, still lying on the battlefield days after the conflict had ended, might well have piqued her interest in a nursing career many years later.<sup>2</sup> Betsi was asked by her employers to accompany them on a relocation to India, but her father refused her consent.<sup>1</sup>

After some time in Bala and Chester, Betsi took a coach to London where she remained for four years, working as a cook and in a laundry.<sup>2</sup> In November 1820, she set sail as a nurse-maid aboard the ship the *Iris*,<sup>1</sup> and later transferred to the

Denmark Hill. She remained with the ship owner and his wife for a number of years, travelling to destinations including Australia, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Singapore, Africa, India and China.<sup>2</sup> However, she left the ship after an argument with the captain.<sup>1</sup> She returned to service in London, finding work as a housekeeper to a wealthy gentleman. Her employer was frequently ill, and so, one of Betsi's jobs was to nurse him back to health.<sup>2</sup> The man died in 1847, and she ended up at age 60 years unemployed again.

Betsi found work as a nurse in Guy's Hospital, later becoming a private nurse.<sup>2</sup> In September 1854, Betsi read about the plight of the sick and wounded following the battle of the Alma in the Crimean War, also Florence Nightingale's plans to take out a cadre of nurses.<sup>2</sup> She applied straight away, only to be told that she was too late. Still determined to go, she wrote to Miss Mary Stanley, sister to the Dean of Westminster, who was taking another group out. She was informed that there was little chance of being accepted due to her advanced age.<sup>2</sup>

However, she succeeded in joining Miss Stanley's expedition somehow, reaching Scutari in Istanbul in December 1854. But on arrival, Betsi was quickly disappointed.<sup>2</sup> Instead of being sent to Florence's military hospital where there were hundreds of sick and injured men, her group was sent to Therapia, the Summer residence of Lady Stratford. The underlying issue was that Florence had not asked for extra staff.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, realising that something had to be done, Florence brought a number of the nurses, including Betsi, to Scutari where she put them to work with menial tasks.<sup>2</sup> In response, Betsi went to see one of Florence's friends, telling her that her time was being wasted when there were sick and injured men who needed her care, threatening to go home and tell the country what was going on.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, this coincided with Florence receiving a request from Lord Raglan for eight nurses to assist the army at Balaclava on the front line; Scutari was three hundred miles from the Crimea and so many soldiers died before they could be treated.<sup>2</sup>

The situation when Betsi arrived at Balaclava was dreadful.<sup>2</sup> The hospital building, an old village school, had a leaky roof, broken windows and poorly functioning drains, thought to be the cause of widespread bowel sickness. Furthermore, Betsi had to share accommodation with five other nurses and was often awoken at night by rats scampering over her mattress. Betsi found many men on the wards suffering from frostbite whose wounds had not been dressed for weeks and

were maggot ridden; she soon set about washing their wounds and applying poultices. Betsi also talked to the men in order to lift their spirits, in spite of fraternisation being against regulations.<sup>1</sup> Discovering that there were no beds for the sick who had to lie on bare floorboards, Betsi ignored the authority of the superintendent and dealt with the situation herself. There was fresh bedding in the store, plus bedsteads and mattresses, so she persuaded the purveyor to issue them.<sup>2</sup> By this time, Betsi was in charge of several wards and she also had to use her skills to cope with an outbreak of fever among the orderlies.

Betsi was soon asked to take over the running of the extra-diet kitchens; these had been established to supplement the basic dietary provisions.<sup>2</sup> Betsi took to this task with gusto, opening the stores to provide not only nourishing comforts but also an adequate supply of clothing. She did not have proper access to kitchen facilities, was only supported by one orderly and often had to cook on an open brazier. Betsi's flouting of the dietary rules seemed to have been frowned upon by the hospital authorities, although they seem to have failed to stop her.<sup>2</sup>

Betsi combined her cooking duties with her general nursing roles and would often stay up all night to perform nursing duties before starting another full day's work.<sup>2</sup> This took a heavy toll on Betsi's health, and apart from general fatigue, she began to suffer badly from dysentery.<sup>2</sup> The doctors recommended a change of air as an aid to recovery. Although Florence offered to pay her expenses so that she might return, Betsi had made up her mind to go home.<sup>2</sup> This fortuitously coincided with a more liberal regime in the hospital under a new superintendent, Margaret Wear. Miss Wear expressed her admiration for Betsi in a letter in October 1855: "I cannot hope to find anyone who will do all you have done so long, so untiring, and often where all others equally ill would have remained in bed; for never, for one single day, during six months in this climate, and in the pestilential air of this hospital did you desert your post: up early and late, and ever preparing comforts for between two and three hundred sick!"<sup>1</sup>

In November 1855, Betsi set sail for home.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, she never recovered her health and died in London on 17th July 1860 at the age of 72 years.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, before she died, Betsi had related her life story to the biographer Jane Williams, who turned it into a book.<sup>3</sup>

So what was Betsi's contribution to public health? I believe that it was her relentless focus on the fundamental pillars of health and well-being that should inspire others. For her, that meant battling against what she regarded as petty bureaucracy and flawed authority to ensure that soldiers in her care had enough to eat and drink, had clean clothing to wear, lived in as comfortable surroundings as possible, were engaged

with and felt cared for. In a Victorian age without some of the modern miracles such as antibiotics, this often worked wonders. It is perhaps fitting that the health organisation named after her is continuing her public health legacy. The Health Board's 10-year strategy, *Living Healthier, Staying Well*, has the primary goal of improving health and well-being and reducing inequalities.<sup>4</sup> This includes promoting well-being, doing more to help people make healthy life choices, targeting resources to where they will make the most difference, stopping people being treated differently because of age, sexual orientation or other reasons and supporting staff's health and well-being. I am sure that Betsi would have approved.

*Cymraeg oedd iaith gyntaf Betsi, ac felly mae fersiwn Cymraeg o'r papur ar gael ar (Welsh was Betsi's first language, and so a Welsh language version of this paper is available).<sup>5</sup>*

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