

WET NURSING: A HISTORICAL REVIEW AND ITS IDEAL CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding and wet nursing have been synonymous since ancient times. Each civilization has carved out its own history regarding wet nursing. This article overviews the historical aspect on how wet nursing began and survived the times and briefly look at it from the perspective of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Also included are factors affecting wet nursing services, that is, social class; occupation; maternal debility; family and friendship ties; as well as myths and taboos. The characteristics of an ideal wet nurse are also discussed from the physical aspects; milk; nutrition; emotion; morality and behaviour. The selection of wet nurse in the form of physical, milk and nutrition are easier to identified. At the same time, characteristics of morality and behaviour is more important to ensure that the life of an infant becomes more pleasant. It is generally believed that children inherit physical and mental features from the source of the milk they consume. Thus, parents are advised to be more mindful in selecting a wet nurse.

Keywords : *breastfeedings, wet nursing, Islam, al-Quran, characteristics of an ideal wet nursing.*

1.0 PREFACE

Throughout the history of mankind, the provision of wet nursing service has always been a point for conversation or discussion whenever the subject of infant feeding practice comes up. In the studies involving Anthropology, forms of breastfeeding and wet nursing differs amongst places and has always been experiencing changes throughout the centuries. Although wet nursing has a history of its own in each human civilization, it is undeniable that the concept of wet nursing has been able to provide quality life for infants. Obviously, the concept of wet nursing which started off centuries ago is still relevant for discussion to these days.

2.0 DEFINITION OF WET NURSING

The term “wet nursing” is used to portray whatever form of breastfeeding provided by someone other than the infant’s biological mother [1]. Wet nursing is the first form of donor milk banking, and it was a form of the practice of breastfeeding another’s child with the objective of being paid for it [2]. The term “dry nursing” is the direct opposite of wet nursing which means a trend where infants are fed with substances with the like of flour, bread or cereals prepared into a soup [3]. Dry nursing is a term used with regard to semi-liquid mixture [4] and it was originally introduced during the last couple of decades of the 17th Century by aristocrats and some gentry [3]. In the same period, foundlings and parish were sent to dry nurses who bottle-fed the infants [5] because of two reasons partly for necessity and taking into consideration the payment for dry nurses is cheaper than wet nurses [3, 6].

Other than that, there was also the term “mercenary wet nurses” to indicate it to be an occupation amongst the women folks. Whenever a family needed the service of a wet nurse and no one from amongst their slaves were able to undertake the task, they then had to ask around from amongst their neighbours or close acquaintances. If none was to be found, an advertisement would have been placed in a local newspaper [7].

More recently, the term “cross-feeding” (or “cross-nursing” in North America) has been used to describe the sharing of breastfeeding activities or mother’s milk among close friends. This is to differentiate this practice to the other practice of wet nursing which was a form of occupation [1].

3.0 HISTORY OF WET NURSING

The history of wet nursing originates from as early as 2000 B.C. and continued up to the 20th Century. Throughout the time, wet nursing grew from a need (2000 B.C.) to a choice (950 B.C. until 1800 A.D.) [8].

From the various facts gathered and historical resources obtained, e.g. the teachings in the Bible, Code of Hammurabi, Egyptian papyri, Greeks and Romans, wet nursing is an ordinary activity in ancient societies [9]. It was quite common practice in Europe when urban parents sent their newborn infants to wet nurses for the first year of babies live [5].

Sending off an infant to a wet nurse is seen to be nothing out of the ordinary in society. During that time, the concept of wet nursing moved towards being more organized with the coming into existence of women being paid to breastfeed the child of another. For example, during the days of ancient Rome, families surrendered their infants to wet nurses upon delivery. Other than that, women wanting to offer breastfeeding for a fee congregated around the *Colonna Lactaria* to solicit their services [10].

Before the Neolithic Age when the domestication of animals and the planting of crops formed a part of the world’s food resources, there was no choice other than mother’s milk. The breastfeeding of an infant was undertaken by its biological mother or another woman, and when

either of the two means became unavailable, the infant would surely die. Wet nursing was an integrated practice widely accepted by society. It became famous during the age of the ancient civilizations although it was not as largely practiced by the Ibrani as compared to the Egyptians and the Mesopotamian society. Ancient Egypt saw wet nursing being widely practiced. During the time of the Pharaohs, for example, wet nursing was a service provided exclusively for the royalty as well as highly born, including for the foundlings. Likewise, during the classical Greek era (5th to 6th Century B.C.), wet nursing services was often being used primarily for the upper-class society. The Romans, as well, used the services of wet nurses. This practice spread to the whole of the Greek colonies and throughout the Roman Empire [3].

Historical evidence has shown that throughout 15th to 18th Century, the wives of European aristocrats, wealthy farmers, academicians, lawyers, doctors and a fraction of rich merchants often used the services of wet nurses. It was quite common practice in Europe when urban parents sent their newborn infants to wet nurses for the first year of babies live [5]. However, from the 15th to the 16th Century, breastfeeding by the biological mother is seen to be a contravention to the norms and culture of the locals. After the middle of the 18th Century, the trend of breastfeeding the biological child by women of the upper and middle class were on the rise despite opposition by the older women who had been brought up in the tradition of wet nursing [3].

Since the start of the 1970's to the present time, the importance of breastfeeding exclusively by the biological mother of the infant has attracted much attention from amongst medical practitioners, academic researchers and local community [11]. With an increase in the promotion and social awareness towards maternal breastfeeding, services provided by wet nurses as an occupation also experienced a decline.

However, the concept of wet nursing still exists today and is known as co-feeding or milk-sharing. The term clearly defines an activity of sharing mother's milk or the sharing of expressed breast milk [1]. Its focus has changed towards the intention of donating as well as offering help within the community.

4.0 WET NURSING ACCORDING TO JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

The concept and regulations dictating wet nursing is noted in the sacred books of the three monotheistic world religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Old Testament and various sources from the Jewish religion have notes describing the nursing of babies. The first reference in the Hebrew Scriptures is found in the Book of Genesis (21:17). One of the most famous tales about wet nursing appears in the book "Exodus" where the Pharaoh's daughter sent Miriam to get a wet nurse for Baby Moses (Exodus 2:7-10) [12]. The Talmud also states the regulations for the Jewish woman to abide by: "*A baby nurses for twenty-four months..... The nursing period should not be cut down for the baby may die of thirst*". During times of emergency, wet nurses may replace the biological mother's task of breastfeeding, or the baby could even be given animal milk, such as those from sheep, goats and cows [4].

The birth of an infant often times was related to relationships between Jews and non-Jews. Wet nursing or *rodriza* appeared in families of wealth where rich Jewish families pay non-Jewish women to become wet nurses, vice versa [13]. In accordance with Jewish law, the father of the infant was fully responsible in matters relating to the breastfeeding of the infant whereby the infant's father had full authority to determine how the infant was to be fed and cared for. This Halakhic Principles is aimed solely to protect the life of the child and to state the clear roles of the mother and the father. Otherwise, in a Jewish family, an infant was not sent to the home of the wet nurse to be nursed [14].

The concepts of breastfeeding in Christianity have been involved mostly with regard to Virgin Mary and her child Jesus Christ. The Virgin and Christ are usually portrayed in the adumbrate embrace of breastfeeding (designated 'Maria Lactan') which indicates the humanity of Christ and the gift of God and occasionally blessing and humbleness. From the Christianity perspective, breastfeeding was also used metaphorically, e.g. the city of Jerusalem pictured as a nursing mother to her inhabitants (Isaiah 66:10-12). Moreover, successful breastfeeding has been brought as a benediction (Genesis, 49:25) while dry breasts were the symbol of a malediction (Hosea, 9:14) [12].

Studies regarding wet nursing practices during the Middle Ages of the Christian community have identified several guidelines that regulate the employment of a wet nurse. Firstly, a wet nurse who was employed for a certain period needs to remain so for a specified time. Furthermore a wet nurse was not allowed to be pregnant until the specified period expires. Therefore, part of the wages of the wet nurse is withheld until the agreement goes through [14].

Likewise, in Islam too the concept of breastfeeding and wet nursing has long been mentioned in the Holy Quran. There are found in 8 verses of the Al-Quran a mention of activities regarding breastfeeding i.e Al-Baqarah verse 223, An-Nisa' verse 23, Al-Hajj verse 2, Al-Qashah verse 12, Luqman verse 14, Al-Ahqaaf verse 15 and At-Talaq verse 6 [15]. According to the Al-Quran, physical maintenance such as food and taking care of the family is the responsibility of the father. During the early days of Islam, it was the responsibility of the father to ensure that his child was breastfed even under the circumstances that the birth mother was not able or did not wish to breastfeed [16]. Even though so, if the mother is not able to herself breastfeed, Islam allows another person to be paid to breastfeed the child.

Breastfeeding by a wet nurse also gives rise to several tenements in Islam known as *Hukum Tahrim*, which means that wet nursing creates impediments to marriage between a nurse and her nursling, as well as between male and female (strange) nurslings suckling from the same nurse [10]. This means when a baby being breastfed by women other than his or her biological mother for five times or more within the period of the first two-years, the baby then becomes her milk son or milk daughter. Therefore, that mother becomes *mahram* or *haram* (illegal) to be wed by the child she so nursed [17]. In the study conducted by researchers from Turkey, 55.4% of the mothers considered wet nursing beneficial. Main reason affected their opinions is religious beliefs, because they said wet nursing is a good deed. In addition, wet nursing is seen as a beneficial not only for child but also for mother [18]. Milk kinship is created

through breastfeeding other than by the birth mother of an infant that results in a relationship that is the same as a blood relationship. In Islam, children that consumes milk from the same women is *haram* to wed each other. This culture is also practiced by Jewish families. Likewise, in the teachings of Greek Christianity, siblings through wet nursing cannot marry each other [1].

5.0 FACTORS REGARDING BREASTFEEDING BY WET NURSES

Breastfeeding by the biological mother is slowly but surely becoming an accepted practice by modern society. World history used to profess that the service of a wet nurse is a practice not alien to ancient society until the emergence of milk substitutes based on animal or soy milk. Obviously, a phenomenon, trend and practice of the society has the ground and basis as to why it existed and is upheld. Several factors have been identified as to why the institution of wet nursing was at one time acceptable to society.

5.1 Social Class

The most obvious factor for having the service of a wet nurse is its reflection of the social status symbol in society. The late 12th to the late 15th centuries, the children of the English nobility and people of high social class was normally placed with wet nurses throughout the period [19]. The group that usually procures the service of wet nursing is the upper class women folks, i.e. the women of the nobility, the elitist, rich and wealthy group. Women from wealthy and rich families, especially those living in the urban areas who did not wish to breastfeed their baby, will pay another women who is obviously poorer to nurse their baby [3, 10]. This happens because the payment for the job of breastfeeding was high at that time compared to other domestic workers. Besides providing payment for the nursing, the employer also needs to make available new clothes and a special room for them. This is to ensure cleanliness and that the baby is well taken care of. Thus, only the aristocrats and from wealthy families can afford such payment [20].

Other than that, using the service of a wet nurse is also due to the desire of the aristocrats to have many children and more frequently, too [9, 21]. This provides the opportunity for them to marry off their children to other rich families in order to increase the wealth and influence of the respective families [22]. Therefore, it has become obvious, too, that breastfeeding is able to space out pregnancy through the natural means of Lactational Amenorrhea [22]. Middle class women who, procure the service of a wet nurse or synthetic milk is found to frequently give birth as compared to those who breastfeed their babies themselves [3].

Furthermore, a lady who regularly uses the services of a wet nurse wants to free herself from the demand of breastfeeding because society dictates that upper class ladies are respectable ladies. However, researchers have noted that from 1150 to 1300, women who breastfeed are seen to be good mothers while women who surrender their babies to wet nurses to avoid the task of breastfeeding to enjoy a more liberated life was explicitly condemned [4].

5.2 Occupation

Since ancient times until just before the era of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the institution of wet nursing became a widely-accepted profession in society. Usually, a wet nurse is an employee who is paid a salary not reciprocal to the breastfeeding [23]. Wet nurses are seen as poor ladies [20] who come from the rural areas in search of employment to nurse babies of the aristocrats. A majority of wet nursing service is not charitable activity but more to providing a service to urban women who are discouraged by their employers from breastfeeding their babies [24]. In the other hand, for working mothers, wet nursing was the particular solution to the problem of infant feeding method before the time bottle-feeding had been introduced [24].

The child care industry consists of three types of occupation, i.e. nursery maids, trained nurses and wet nurses. Generally, nursery maids function as child-minders who receive poor treatment from employers and doctors as well as paid low wages with long working hours. Trained nurses are graduates trained in hospitals and nursing schools. They receive higher wages and at same time refuse the role of a servant, The duties of a wet nurse is related to providing nourishment for the infant. The duties are almost similar to a babysitter and trained nurse, although the task of breastfeeding differentiates a wet nurse from other childminders [20].

Halfway through the 19th Century, several photographs found recorded pictures of wet nurses who are of colour, smartly dressed and well-groomed alongside their fair-skinned “children”. Those photographs portray a relationship that is positive, harmonious and full of love. The reflection of that love between the wet nurses and her “children” is made obvious when the “children” are seen clinging to the arms of their wet nurses despite the ethnic difference of their skin colour [7].

5.3 Maternal Debility

Breastfeeding by wet nurses is seen as the safest alternative when the biological mother of an infant is not able to perform the task of breastfeeding. Failure to breastfeed by the biological mother could be due to natural causes, such as health problems faced by the mother, the demise of the mother [21] or even due to social causes, that is, the woman being divorced and refusing to breastfeed her baby [10].

Soranus of Ephesus (early 2nd Century), a Greek obstetrician of his days, was of the opinion that breastfeeding by the biological mother should be appropriately substituted by a wet nurse because a mother’s health status after the delivery of a child has effect over the milk produced. As far as Soranus is concerned, mother’s milk produced for the first 20 days of delivery is unhealthy and not suitable to be given to the infant [25].

In fact, not all women succeed in breastfeeding. Failure to do so is mentioned in the earliest medical encyclopedia, that is, The Papyrus Ebers which originated from Egypt (1550 B.C). Simple notes regarding children and containing prescriptions for women who failed to breastfeed is as follows [26]:

“To get supply of milk in a woman’s breast for suckling a child: Warm bones of a sword fish in oil and rub her back with it. Or: let the woman sit crossed-legged and eat fragrant bread of soused durra, while rubbing the parts with the poppy plant”.

The above prescription shows that the failure to breastfeed was a problem faced by women during the days of ancient Egypt and the services of a wet nurse was the main alternative method for infant nourishment [8].

5.4 Filial and Friendship Ties

One of the factors that brought about the soaring of the services of wet nurses was due to relationships amongst family and friends. The service that was on a voluntary basis and unpaid for was offered to relatives or family members making the wet nursing culture widespread among the lower class who resided in the urban as well as the rural areas [10].

Breastfeeding that was practised by the early Muslim community is to increase networking and filial ties, whereby it is seen to be an effort towards cooperation [27]. Among the functions of a wet nurse is to build family ties; as in the relationship amongst sedentary communities and ethnic groups of the desert. More practically, building family ties, through wet nursing with neighbours, which normally leads to becoming family members through marriage. The concept of wet nursing also helps to reduce endogamous marriages (i.e. marriages within a particular group in accordance with custom or law) and encourages exogamous marriages (i.e. marriage to a person belonging to a tribe or group other than your own as required by custom or law). Other than that, the concept of wet nursing is also able to create a religious-political community or mentioned as *ummah* based on values and objectives and not merely on blood ties [10].

The practice of breastfeeding amongst neighbours also brings about wellbeing from the aspect of creating semi-private space that allows women more freedom to conduct their daily chores, for instance to appear unveiled while cooking or washing clothes outside their homes [27].

5.5 Myths and Taboos

Breastfeeding is filled with myths and taboos. One of the most obvious is that breastfeeding is seen as a symbol of poverty and not breastfeeding is seen as a form of luxury and status [22].

An obvious myth surrounding breastfeeding is that the first secretion from the mammary glands after giving birth or now known as colostrum is harmful to babies. According to Soranus, milk that is produced by the mother within the first 20 days of delivery of a baby

is “in most cases unwholesome, being thick, too caseous and therefore hard to digest, raw and not prepared to perfection” [25]. The perception that colostrum is “bad” substance that needs to be expressed and discarded before the baby is allowed to be breastfed is a common belief among a majority of the cultures throughout history [3].

Also, nursing women are not allowed to engage in sexual intercourse because it is strongly believed that it causes the mother’s milk to curdle [21]. From the Roman Era and 100 years after, doctors have been advising nursing women to abstain from sex during the breastfeeding period for fear that it will curdle the milk produced [22]. This widespread belief brought about a rise of a thriving wet nursing industry at the beginning of the 19th Century [22] due to the fact that most wet nurses were single ladies (usually are those that have borne children out of wedlock), divorced or widowed. Past research proved that breastfeeding poses a risk for the baby because breastmilk might be infected, and the skin contact between the baby and wet nurse can transmit a disease [28].

Besides that, breastfeeding is thought to be detrimental to the beauty of one’s skin and shape of the body; breastfeeding was equated to “slavery” and the status of those indulging in it went down to the rank of mammals. Breastfeeding had come to be seen as course and a way of confining women. Public nursing was unacceptable as it was thought that women should be in the confines of a home [20]. Due to such myths and taboos, nursing a baby did not earn its rightful place in the hearts of the ladies ever since ancient times right up to the 19th Century.

6.0 IDEAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A WET NURSE

The classification of a wet nurse becomes a point for discussion so as to ensure that the life of an infant becomes more pleasant. It is generally believed that children inherit physical and mental features from the source of the milk they consume. Thus, parents are advised to be more mindful in selecting a wet nurse. The following characteristics of a wet nurse is outlined to provide a guide for parents requiring the service.

6.1 Physical

Soranus was of the opinion that a wet nurse should ideally be between the ages of 25 and 40, have had the experience of giving birth twice or thrice, be in a good state of health and having good habitus, possess a large frame as well as favourable skin colour. The size of her breasts should be moderate, i.e. not too small, soft and unwrinkled [25].

Ambroise Pare (1510 – 1590 A.D.), a famous French medical figure of the 16th Century quoted that “She should have a large chest and rather big breasts that are not flaccid and hanging, but midway between hard and soft”. Breasts that are of medium firmness are a precursor for milk of good quality that should flow smoothly when suckled by a baby. If the breasts are too firm, the milk is considered too thick and difficult for the baby to suck [25].

Ibnu Sina in *Al_Qanun fi at-Tibb* also list the physical attributes of a wet nurse who is a woman of aged 25 to 35 years. Women of this age-group not only have good health, but mothers who are too young or too old usually experienced emotional instability which influences the quality of the milk they produce. This group has also attained maturity in experience and psychologically [10]. As mentioned by Soranus: “Younger women are ignorant in the rearing of children and their minds are still somewhat fiddle and childish” [25]. Further attributes are the physical appearance, that is, of good skin colour, a strong neck and chest, good posture, not too fat or too thin [10].

6.2 Milk

In choosing a wet nurse, medical practitioners have specified that wet nurses need to have good health, have a healthy baby, milk of high quality and normal personality traits [20, 6]. According to classical Greek medical practitioners, there is found a connection between the physical attributes of wet nurses with the quantity and quality of milk produced [10].

Regarding the milk quality produced, Ibn al-Jazzar al Qayrawani has stated that the quality milk contain all elements of balance, moderate quantity, good colour, smell and taste. Three elements required in milk are watery, cheesy and oily. According to him, the best mother’s milk is that contains a balance of all the three elements [10].

Good mother’s milk should meet the specification as follows: moderately white in colour; pleasant odour; smooth, even and homogeneous composition; moderate density; sweet and pleasant tasting; and finally, it does not easily turn sour if stored as well as produces only a little bit of whey or none at all [25].

6.3 Nutrition

For the diet of a wet nurse, she should hinder herself from consuming food that will cause the milk to become bitter, that is, food like leeks, onions, garlic and radish. Meat that is not easily digestible e.g beef, mutton, as well as food that contains too much flavouring should also be avoided. Therefore, wet nurses are encouraged to eat bread made of fresh wheat, egg yolk, pigeon meat, chicken and freshwater fish [4].

Ibn al-Jazzar al-Qayrawani suggests that wet nurses adjust their food intake with the age of the infant she is nursing. He also encourages exercise using the hands [10]. According to Soranus, wet nurses should refrain from consuming alcohol based on three factors, i.e. firstly, alcohol destroys the soul and body of the wet nurse and spoils the milk produced. Secondly, alcohol causes the wet nurse to go to sleep and is hard for her to stay awake causing the baby to be left unattended. Thirdly, too much alcohol will be channelled to the milk causing the baby to become inactive and unconscious [25].

6.4 Emotion

During the Antebellum era, medical practitioners believe that strong emotions of mothers cause the milk to turn toxic [20]. Women who are wet nurses need to acquire sympathetic and loving traits whereby she can go about her duty without haste and avoid complaints. For women who lack sympathy towards the infants they are nursing, they will not be able to give all their attention despite the baby been crying for long. Wet nurses should not be hot-tempered because naturally, the characteristic of the nursling becomes similar to the nurse. Women should also be meticulous in dealing with babies under their care [25].

6.5 Morality and Behaviour

Those women who become wet nurses should stay away from sexual relationships because it is believed that such activity contributes to negative effects towards the milk produced and to the baby, too. Self abstinence is so that promiscuous behavior during the nursing period is not practiced by the wet nurse which is one of the conditions set for a wet nurse. Although historical notes have recorded that many women who become wet nurses are actually women who have engaged in illicit sexual activities and gave birth to illegitimate children, their activities have been overshadowed by their wisdom and efficiency in managing and wet nursing their charges.

Thus, moral decay of some women who become wet nurses has become a bone of contention causing families of the children involved to be more cautious in choosing their wet nurse. Finally, breastfeeding by the biological mother is slowly being accepted by society and the demand for the services of a wet nurse has decreased as a result of the declining moral and health standards, and the angry attitude of the wet nurses [20]. Other contributing factors causing the decline in demand for wet nurses include the costs incurred by employers, management problems and diseases of the wet nurse hidden from the knowledge of the employer [28]. Among the contagious disease borne by wet nurses are tuberculosis and syphilis [20]. In the other hand, one of accepted practical alternatives to reduce the risk of mother-to-child HIV transmission is wet nursing. This can be proved that wet nursing is kind of rescuer in the constriction [29].

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

The wet nurse institution is currently seen very significant in the modern era. The researcher believes that the system of child care (daycare) that is offered to the working mothers is a service of a wet nurse institution. It should be clearly understood that when the women enter the working arena, a strong supporting system has to be provided. This is to ensure the social development sustainability, family, health and the psychology of the mother, children and society. Children who are left at the care centers need to get the best care. The employer is responsible to provide a conducive atmosphere to ensure that working mothers feel calm when their children are left under someone's care. This will definitely make a positive impact on their employment and the results of their work.

Besides, the important issue that has to be highlighted is the issue of breastfeeding. Many studies have found that the rate of breastfeeding decreases rapidly when a mother starts to work (*reference*). This matter cannot be taken lightly, but it will give an impact to the health of the children as well as the work achievement of the mother [18]. Therefore, the breastfeeding supporter has been promoting and championing the continuation of breastfeeding for working mothers by giving exposure and education on the importance and methods of breastfeeding for the working mothers. The celebration of World Breastfeeding Week 2015 with the theme "Breastfeeding and Work: Let's Make It Work" has proven the importance of protecting and promoting the breastfeeding for working mothers.

However, for those mothers who face time constraints due to the high job demands, they can find a wet nurse from among the close relatives or acquaintances who are breastfeeding their children. The practice of sharing the expressed breast milk is seen very positive for preserving the culture of breastfeeding in public. Nevertheless, there are few things need to be identified before deciding to share the breast milk. For the Muslim community, sharing the breast milk will have an impact on the family law. In addition to that, the selection of a wet nurse should also be emphasized according to the guidelines described in this article.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Wet nursing has a long history in human civilization. Since ancient times right up to the modern era, the issue of wet nurses has never ceased being the topic of discussion and academic research. Wet nursing has experienced evolution from the functional aspect as a form of occupation to a form of welfare practice through donation and sharing of mother's milk. Obviously, the concept of wet nursing has been recognized by the monotheistic world religions, i.e. Islam, Judaism and Christianity that has outlined several rules and regulation pertaining to wet nursing. Thus, the concept of wet nursing should be upheld although the functions and mode of implementation has changed with the times. Research regarding wet nursing and matters connected to it should continue so as to bring about much good to society.

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