



### **Medical Symbols: Lamp of Knowledge (Life)**

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The lamp of knowledge (life) was derived from the ancient Egyptian ankh, a tau cross with a loop at the top. Originally, the ankh was regarded as a sacred symbol of life. Later, it was modified into the lamp of life with its eternal flame of knowledge and was added as a bowl to the top of the staff of Aesculapius. The lamp of knowledge (life) is the official symbol of the nursing profession and of higher education.

The inspiration for the traditional symbol of the nursing profession (the lamp of life) no doubt comes from the "lady with the lamp," a title given to Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), the founder of the nursing profession, whose life was dedicated to all phases of nursing. Early in the Crimean War (1853-1856), the deplorable facilities for the care of the wounded became evident. Under the direction of Florence Nightingale, a small staff of nurses went to Scutari (near Istanbul in Turkey). Within a few months, the military hospital wards were clean and efficient. Florence Nightingale was known as "the lady with the lamp" because she made her rounds by the light of the lamp she carried.

Throughout the world, nurses form the largest single group of health-care workers, and the availability of good nursing care in a country is a measure of the health status of that nation. Near the beginning of the 20th century, nurses began to organize national associations, such as the American Nurses' Association, founded in 1896. Its official publication is the *American Journal of Nursing*. In 1899, the International Council of Nurses was founded. This council's journal is the *International Nursing Review*.

The inspiration for adopting the lamp of knowledge as the official symbol for higher education could have come from the story of the Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes (412?-323 BC). Diogenes is said to have carried a lantern at noon in search of an "honest man," the honest man possibly representing truth and knowledge, although the relationship of knowledge to higher education is obvious.

A stamp was issued by the United States in 1962 to publicize the role of education in American culture and development, in commemoration of the signing of the law creating land-grant colleges.