

Joyce Ely, RN, Pioneer in Florida Public Health Nursing

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Victoria Joyce Ely was a prominent figure in Florida public health during the first half of the 20th century. She made several important contributions to maternal and child health in Florida.

Born: September 12, 1889, Flora, IL

Died: May 12, 1979, Ruskin, FL

Family: unmarried, no children

Education:

St. Luke's Hospital School for Nurses in St Louis, MO, awarded a diploma in August, 1915.

Postgraduate training at Teacher's College, Columbia University, New York. About 1920

Lobenstine Midwifery School, New York, awarded nurse midwife certificate. January – July, 1933.



Miss Joyce Ely

Career:

Following her initial nursing education, Ely worked at St. Luke's Hospital. In addition, she assumed a position as a reserve nurse in the Army Nurse Corps. She was placed on active duty in May of 1917 and assigned to the Washington University Base Hospital, Unit 21. Her unit was stationed at Rouen, France. She returned to the United States in June, 1919.

Through an affiliation with the American Red Cross, Ely accepted a position with a cypress lumber company near Perry, Florida in the Florida panhandle. Hookworm, typhoid, and malaria were severe problems in Florida during this era. Ely taught mill town families the basics of patient care for those with illnesses, and also taught and supervised families in using basic hygiene and disease prevention methods. Following this success, Ely's work evolved into other Red Cross efforts around the state.

In 1921, the federal Sheppard-Towner Act was passed and funds became available to address the terrible problem of maternal and infant mortality in Florida. As a result of a limited supply of medical providers and racial segregation, Florida had over 3,000 "Granny" midwives in the 1920's – 1930's. Ely was sent to midwifery school and became the first nurse-midwife in Florida. Her job was to supervise and improve the standards of midwifery work.

When Ely started, the maternal death rate in Florida was 10.2 per 1000 births, and the infant mortality rate was over 61 per 1000 live births. Midwives attended 30% of births in Florida, twice the national average. Midwives had no access to formal education prior to Ely's tenure at the Board of Health. Ely pioneered a series of midwifery seminars around the state, and midwives began to be screened for communicable diseases. Maternal and infant health improved dramatically. This trend was coupled with the increased medicalization of childbirth throughout the country.

Ely remained with the state health office for 15 years, finally leaving in 1944 to accept a position in Ruskin, Florida, where her mother had retired. Ely established a clinic in the rural community through her work as a nurse with the newly formed Hillsborough County Health Department. Her work included immunizations and the issuance of health cards to workers. She also continued to attend home births in the area, and screened residents to identify cases of tuberculosis and hookworm. She retired in 1957.

Honors and awards:

In 1954, a newly constructed county health building in Ruskin was dedicated to her and named the Joyce Ely Health Center. The center was replaced in 1976 with a new building also named for Ely. She received a Hall of Memory award from the Florida Public Health Association in 1983. In 2002, she was selected by Governor Jeb Bush for induction into the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

Author:

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