

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL NURSING



by Sue Holmes

O The world of school nursing today is an exciting one. After 28 years as a school nurse, I can tell you that we are not sitting around in our offices waiting for children to come in with skinned knees or tummy aches, as the stereotype of a school nurse might convey. Our practice has evolved into much more than that.

School nursing is an exciting, independent practice, where we help to shape the future of our student's health and thus the future of our nation. We are a part of an interdisciplinary educational team helping to develop interventions and strategies to assist our students to succeed. Those strategies might be as simple as helping the parent obtain an order so we can administer medication, or as complex as helping a student deal with the aftermath of a traumatic brain injury that has left him wheelchair bound.

Our practice includes the eight components of school health, which I will describe in this article: Health Services; Health Education; Healthy Environment; Nutritional Services; PE/Activity; Counseling/Mental Health; Parent/Community Involvement; and Staff Wellness.

Students are coming to school today with many complex medical and/or psychological conditions. In my practice at two elementary schools, I see students with gastrostomy tubes, seizures severe enough to require oxygen on site, diabetes, asthma, ventilators, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder,

autism, Down's syndrome, and other genetic disorders.

Dealing with these students and their parents is a challenge in itself. Parents entrust their children to us for seven to eight hours a day, and for many of them this is a scary prospect. Parents are often demanding, and school nurses need to reassure them that we will administer medications on time, not to mention keeping on eye out for their children's specific health needs, such as recognizing the signs of their child's low blood sugar or seizure disorder. Understandably, it is often hard for parents to trust strangers to care for their child, and we must do our best to earn that trust.



The school nurse is the only health care professional who deals with all children in their building facing a variety of care needs. For example, ancillary health care personnel such as occupational and physical therapists and speech and language pathologists work closely with those children in need of their specialized care. We provide health services to all our students, ranging from

teaching children wound care to training to providing emergency care to those with diabetes.

Health Education can take many forms, and school nurses are often called upon to educate students as well as staff. When I saw a child with leukemia, I showed her classmates a Peanuts video from the American Cancer Society to help explain why she would be missing a lot of school, and why she needed to be treated the same as before her diagnosis. Given the proper education, information, and role models, students can be extremely compassionate and empathic toward children with special health conditions.

School nurses are the experts in the academic

setting on issues such as AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDS), as well as other contagious diseases. We are involved with writing curriculums and guidelines for human reproduction units and provide the expertise when these units are presented.

Ensuring a healthy environment is another facet of our job. This means anything from helping evaluate criteria for new playground equipment to monitoring pesticides used in the building or the grounds, as well as monitoring the safety of the air in general. Playground safety is frequently taught to elementary students.

Crisis intervention is now becoming an important part of providing a safe, healthy environment for students and staff. Since Columbine and other school shootings, and the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, schools around the country are reviewing and updating their crisis plans. The school nurse should be the center of any crisis plan developed, and is often the only staff trained in emergency management and triage. We help in the planning for emergencies affecting the school community and are now educating ourselves and our staffs on bioterrorism.

Public health departments use our communicable disease reports to evaluate what illnesses are occurring in our communities, and their staffs make decisions based on those reports when recommending closing hospitals to visitors at the height of flu season. Our observations and data collection have assisted in early detection of communicable disease outbreaks in my community, such as the measles in 1990, and campylobacter in 1998. Personnel from the Center for Disease Control eventually became involved with these outbreaks.

My responsibilities often include talking to students frequently about healthy eating habits and the four components of health: adequate nutrition, sleep, cleanliness, and exercise. In this "fast food" society, many

children have never sat down with their families at mealtime, or even enjoyed healthy foods at home. Students often complain of mid-morning headaches and stomachaches because they have not eaten breakfast that morning, or even dinner the night before. I provide them with crackers and milk in these situations, but this is no replacement for healthy eating habits at home.

Many of today's youth are overweight due to poor diet and lack of exercise. I often challenge them to turn off the TV and video games after school and participate in some form of exercise, such as riding their bikes or scooters,



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rollerblading or skateboarding, or playing basketball. Helping them understand the importance of aerobic activity will hopefully help them establish regular exercise habits they will maintain into adulthood and throughout their lives.

Schools are fast becoming community centers. Volunteers for get-out-the-vote campaigns and donating blood are frequently present at our schools. PTA meetings as well as other forums are held at our facilities as well. School buildings host English as a second language and computer classes for parents and community members. School nurses are frequently asked to give presentations on the school health

curriculum or on health issues facing the community. We work with many community agencies and groups to obtain eyeglasses, medication, food, health care, or other services for our students and their families.

School nurses participate in staff wellness activities, such as monitoring blood pressures for teachers, organizing a wellness program for the staff, or providing them with information on obtaining their vaccines, and in some cases, administering them. As the only on-site health care professionals, we are often asked to interpret a new diagnosis a staff or family member just received.

While some days are chaotic, I never regret my decision to enter school nursing, as it is a rewarding, challenging, enriching career. Just seeing a child's delight over new glasses, or getting a quick hug from a kindergartner, makes it all worthwhile. I hope you will consider school nursing as you plan your future career in nursing. ■

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Resources

The National Association of School Nurses nasn@nasn.org