

2007 NSNA/Nursing Spectrum Essay Contest Grand Prize Winner

Disaster Relief and the Role of the Nursing Student

Jenna Sanders

Jenna Sanders, University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, IN, won the Essay Contest Grand Prize, presented at NSNA's 55th Annual Convention, April 11-15, 2007, in Anaheim, CA. Students were asked to respond to the question "In the wake of recent disasters, including Katrina, the 2004 tsunami, recent earthquakes, and the possibility of a bird flu pandemic, what can nursing students do to prepare themselves and their community of a disaster?" Sanders won a \$500 dollar gift cheque, complimentary registration to the Convention, and publication of her essay in all eight editions of Nursing Spectrum, all four editions of NurseWeek, and Imprint. Four other students were also recognized for their essays, which will also be published in Imprint. Gregory A. Haas, First Place, Indian River Community College, Fort Pierce, FL; Deborah Beck, Second Place, New Hampshire Community College, Manchester, NH; Carlee Miller, Third Place, University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, IN; Melissa Pierce, Honorable Mention; Wichita State University, Wichita, KS.

The word "disaster" conjures up mental images of September 11th, Katrina, tsunamis in Asia, pandemic bird flu – there is no shortage of mental video. Still, it is important to remember that "disaster" can also include smaller-scale events in one's own community such as house or building fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, or chemical spills. As nursing students, we are in a unique position to provide our services. Given our training and experience levels, we are ideally suited to participate in many phases of the disaster process. These phases include: Prevention, Planning, Pre-Certification, Provision of care and Patient education. These 5 Ps of disaster relief, if practiced by nursing students nationwide, could have a dramatic impact on local and national ability to respond to crises.

The first step in the process is prevention. Through school projects, editorials in local papers, and regular patient contact in clinical rotations and job experiences, nursing students have a broad reach to spread information about disaster prevention. This starts quite simply with home and building safety equipment such as smoke detectors. The more proactive we are about educating and assisting our clients in regards to preventative measures, the more disas-

ters we can prevent. Along with prevention of the actual disaster comes prevention of crises that can follow disasters, such as running out of food, medical supplies, and water – the basic essentials of life. As public health advocates and participants, nursing students should be actively participating in communicating the requirements for adequate disaster preparedness supplies. Community Health projects at the school and state level are a perfect opportunity to assemble kits and provide them to those unable to put them together themselves. Those who have the financial means to produce their own kits often still need education as to what they should have on hand in case of disaster. Health fairs are an excellent place to disseminate this information to a large number of clients.

One of the most critical steps in any mass response procedure is response planning. Without procedures in place ahead of time for established student, faculty, emergency responder, nurse and physician roles in disaster situations, chaos is inevitable. We need only witness uncoordinated responses during in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast following hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Student organizations such as the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) have begun the process of



Laura Hudgens (far left) with the *Nursing Spectrum/NurseWeek* essay winners, including Grand Prize winner Jenna Sanders (next to Laura Hudgens) and sponsor representative Robert Hess (center), Gannett Healthcare Group.

establishing the student's role in these situations through a resolution passed at the 2006 House of Delegates entitled, "The Establishment of Protocols for Disaster Relief Guiding the Scope of Practice for Student Nurses and the Collection and Distribution of Donations." At the local level, Student Nurse Associations can meet with hospital disaster plan coordinators, local legislators, and emergency service coordinators to formulate a plan of action that encourages the best possible use of student resources.

Concurrent with planning comes one of the most important steps for the nursing student desiring a relief role – pre-certification. The Red Cross offers a variety of disaster relief certification courses designed for healthcare workers (Grissom, 2002). Completion of these courses prior to facing a disaster situation allows relief organizations such as The Red Cross to contact you directly and coordinate their response efficiently.

Well-meaning volunteers frequently show up at disaster scenes ready to help, but without certification ahead of time, organizations have difficulty using them effectively. These courses are free, and offered regularly at Red Cross locations nationwide. Additionally, free online National Incident Management System (NIMS) certification courses are available, and help ensure that in the process of responding to a disaster, the nursing

student is speaking the same "language" as other relief workers on site. With this certification, coordination amongst government leaders, emergency responders, nurses and physicians flows smoothly and effectively.

Once on-scene, the nursing student can often be restricted in the physical care of patients due to lack of licensure. Working out a plan ahead of time with nursing faculty could allow for assistance in care under the supervision of an RN, similar to the clinical setting. In absence of this, students are able to provide strong support services to the nurses and physicians on-scene with their unique understanding of the procedures being performed and the equipment and supplies necessary. One of the most frequently experienced diagnoses following a disaster situation is anxiety (SAMHSA, 2007), which can affect patients at every age level. This includes healthcare workers and first responders as well, and an alert nursing student free to focus on the mental health of those involved in the disaster is able to focus on therapeutic care. Providing the patient with an opportunity to express their feelings, fears and concerns can go a long way towards reducing their anxiety level. Additionally, allowing this to happen as soon as possible after the disaster could have an effect on whether or not patients experience

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Providing patient education by alerting patients to the signs and symptoms of PTSD and allowing for a "psychological debriefing," enables them to realize that their experience is normal, and apply their best effective coping mechanisms to the task.

While nursing students clearly lack licensure, they do not as a group lack experience with patient care, compassion, an ability to think quickly on their feet, and the capacity to hold the hand of a patient in need and just listen. With proper use of the 5 Ps, coordination and flow of disaster response both locally and nationwide can be dramatically improved. With rare exceptions, such as firefighters after September 11th, nurses are continually chosen by citizens in Gallup polling as the most ethical and trusted professionals (Gallup, 2006). Patients put their trust in us to be ready to care for them when the need arises, to educate them in their follow-up care, and to listen and help in every way that we can. We have chosen to become nurses out of a desire to help people, and during a disaster there is no greater time of need. ☺

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