

essay contest

# 2008 NSNA/*Nursing Spectrum* Essay Contest Grand Prize Winner

## Global Awareness in Nursing

Jennifer Steif

Jennifer T. Steif, University of Wisconsin– Eau Claire – won the NSNA/*Nursing Spectrum* Essay Contest presented at NSNA’s 56th Annual Convention, March 26-30, 2008 in Grapevine, TX. Students were asked to respond to the question, “It seems that we’re living in a technology-driven modern world, yet there are people who die from basic needs like lack of access to portable water. Why do you think it’s important for nursing students to be aware of international (and domestic) health care issues, and what actions can they take to better these issues?”

Ms. Steif 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*.

Stedman (2005) defines a nurse as someone “who is educated in the scientific basis of nursing under defined standards of education and is concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of human responses to actual or potential health problems” (p. 1018). When each one of us chose to go into nursing we committed ourselves to the care of others. I have quickly realized that this is not something that stops after an eight hour shift at the hospital, but continues throughout each and every day. Although many of us have had the opportunity to be born into a ‘technology driven modern world,’ with access to almost every possible thing we could need within the means of monetary issues, it is important to recognize that there are many individuals throughout the world and within our own country that don’t even have access to the necessities of life. Thus, it becomes our obligation to become informed of international and domestic issues, and with the opportunity to access technology and resources to collaborate and help provide to the less fortunate.

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), more than 1.5 million children under age 5 die each year because they don’t have adequate sanitation to clean water (Summer, 2008). On a daily basis,

many of us do not think twice about getting a glass of water from the kitchen or filling our water bottles at the school fountain, but many around the world struggle with finding clean water or simply do not have access to it at all. I think we can all agree that everyone should have the opportunity to grow up with proper nutrition and live in a healthy environment, yet there are many countries throughout the world where children and families do not have access to clean water or even enough food to survive. Many protozoan and bacterial diseases can be prevented simply by having access to clean water and/or providing education about measures that can be taken to disinfect contaminated water. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2006), measures such as boiling, pasteurization, filtration, and halogenation with chlorine and iodine can help to properly disinfect contaminated water. Also, teaching families how to properly clean and store food aid in reducing the risk of food-borne illnesses such as e.coli. This helps prevent many gastrointestinal diseases that can be transmitted through contaminated food and can help save many lives. So it is easy to see how many illnesses can be prevented if communities are provided with education and resources, but they just need people willing to provide it.

When looking at the issues involved in national and global health care, it can be overwhelming. It makes you wonder: "What can I do to help with these issues?" As nursing students, nurses, and health care providers I believe that it is our calling to reach out to others in need. We have been given the opportunity to have access to a variety of technological advantages and resources and it is our duty to stay informed and help with what we can. Nursing students play a vital role in this mission because we are the future of nursing and the future of healthcare. The importance of simply becoming aware of these issues becomes essential as we look for simple and complex ways that we can make an impact on society. We are nursing, and we can be the change that this world needs to help end hunger and preventable diseases.

There are several ways that we can become involved such as simply becoming a part of activities within our community, or traveling to various parts of the world to help within their communities. Many colleges and universities now offer study abroad programs to allow students to see various parts of the world. I encourage students to become involved in these activities in order to gain a culturally competent perspective about other cultures and communities. Along with this, it is also important for school curriculum to incorporate global and cultural issues because nurses are now dealing with a much larger population base in healthcare, and it is important for nurses to be aware of current issues and perspectives in order to best care for their patients.

Another way for nursing students to become involved is to join professional organizations such as their school, state, or national student nurse's organization. These programs have wonderful reputations for reaching out within their communities and becoming involved in global issues. Nursing students can also use our technological advances to help other

countries in need by adopting children and families to help stop hunger and providing them with the opportunity for education. I believe that providing education is one of the greatest ways that we can help one another. Providing people with the opportunity to receive education and teaching helps them to become aware of issues such as better hygiene and medical treatments and thus it can equip themselves with the knowledge to give back to their own communities.

This past January I had the opportunity to become involved in a medical mission trip to Dominican Republic. Our team consisted of 18 people from the United States (part



Jennifer Steif, NSNA/Nursing Spectrum essay winner.

medical, part construction), four Dominican doctors, two or three translators, and several others from the Dominican Republic. We worked in collaboration with a mission organization and several churches to provide villages with medical care, food, and water filtration systems. We spent 10 days traveling in the Dominican Republic and saw around 1300 patients, delivered rice and beans, and provided water filters to several families.

When I returned to the United States and to work and clinicals, I found it interesting to see the same basic needs in my patients here as I did in the Dominican Republic. It reminded me that the core of each person is essentially the same, and that we all really have the same

needs, regardless of being rich or poor or where we live. In an article entitled "Tapping Into Health," written in response to an issue in *Consuelo, Dominican Republic*, Summers (2008) states: "Here, nothing is easy. Even clean water, the most basic necessity, comes at a price too many can't afford. In *Consuelo* there are two choices: buy expensive bottled water or drink cheaper city water contaminated with parasites, chemicals, and sewage – and get sick" (p. 5). In this instance, organizations collaborated with local churches in *Consuelo* and provided clean water at a cheap price for local families. For one mother, clean water has given her hope. "Now I have peace of mind. I know that my children are not going to get sick because of the water" (Summers, 2008). There are many programs such as the one that I was involved in and the Healing Waters program through Compassion that make it possible to provide families in need with essential resources, such as a clean source of water.

I encourage nursing students to become involved in an issue they are passionate about. It doesn't have to be providing clean water to a third world country, but it can be as simple as donating food to a local pantry or providing a child with warm mittens for the winter. In closure, I would like to leave nurses and nursing students with this final quote to ponder by as Mary Oliver writes in her poem *When Death Comes*, "I don't want to end up simply having visited this world." ©

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## references

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