



NURSES STRENGTHEN THE FABRIC OF PUBLIC HEALTH

by Chris Day and Marcia Stanhope

When I was young, my great grandmother made me a quilt large enough to protect me from the elements. Health care and public health are much like my quilt. They are composed of various systems, people, and programs, which ideally work in unison to protect our nation's health. As health care and public health evolve, new colors and designs in the form of education, services, and policies are woven into their fabric. However, as their patterns become increasingly complex, it is often difficult to recognize the quilt's purpose. Public health nurses (PHNs) serve as linchpins in health care and public health. Their unique blend of knowledge in basic and clinical science, population-based health, leadership, research, and community service, helps them visualize the interconnectedness between these two fields. The public health nurse weaves many of these skills together to improve community, family, and individual health, while strengthening the fabric of health care and public health.

In April 2003, I had the pleasure of attending my first NSNA annual convention in Phoenix as part of an interdisciplinary

panel sponsored by the National League for Nursing. The panel was composed of representatives from various national student organizations in medicine, physical therapy, nursing, and public health, who were all participating in the Student Health Alliance. The Student Health Alliance (SHA) is a coalition of 13 national student organizations representing 180,000 student members nationwide and dedicated to improving collaboration among students to improve health. In the spirit of SHA, the panel presentations enhanced student understanding of each of the key areas addressed on the panel, and improved collaboration among the students and professions we represented.

One central theme emerged: that the role of and opportunities for nurses in public health are unclear. I am writing this article with my colleague Dr. Marcia Stanhope, to explain what public health is, provide some examples of what public health has to offer nurses and the nursing profession, describe the role of nurses in public health, and highlight several related educational and career opportunities.

—Chris Day

What is Public Health?

In the 1988 Institute of Medicines report, *The Future of the Public Health*, public health is defined as what we as a society do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.¹ Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, there has been an unprecedented level of awareness by the American public about the critical role public health plays in protecting the public's health. Unfortunately, most people now identify public health with bioterrorism and emergency preparedness only. Public health encompasses so many aspects of our daily lives that we can easily take it for granted. The following scenario illustrates just how much public health affects our lives.

Every morning, thousands of you awake to prepare for class. You may have some cereal with *fresh milk* for



breakfast. Then it's off to the bathroom to brush your teeth with *safe drinking water*. You dress, hop in your car, put on your seatbelt, and pull out of the driveway. On your way, you stop your car as a crossing guard allows children to cross the street on their way to school, thanks to *traffic safety rules*. Once you reach campus, you settle at your desk and begin relentlessly taking notes on your new *ergonomically designed laptop keyboard*. A number of your classmates are out with the flu; however, you are not worried because you get a regular *flu shot* in the fall of each year from the health department.

At lunch, you walk into your school's *smoke-free cafeteria* and enjoy a turkey sandwich prepared in a kitchen inspected and approved by the *health department*. You drink a vitamin C fortified fruit juice

This facility is
smoke free.



which, according to *public health research*, can fend off cancer and heart disease, slow the aging process, prevent colds, and extend your life by up to 35 years.

Clearly, public health positively impacts each of us in our daily lives, but we have become so accustomed to our safe environment that we do not often notice. We have come to expect clean air, safe drinking water, traffic safety, child protection, a smoke-free workplace and schools, bacteria-free food, innovative office equipment, and immunizations. Public health typically receives attention only when there is a health crisis, such as an outbreak of foodborne illness or a new strain of virus.

Public health nursing is the practice of promoting and protecting the health of populations using knowledge from nursing, social, and public health sciences.² Public health nurses serve as the backbone of the public health system. In fact, in 2000, over 40% of the public health workforce, estimated to be about 448,254 workers, were nurses.³ Public health nurses translate and articulate the health and illness experiences of diverse, often vulnerable individuals and families in the population to health planners and policy makers, and assist members of the community to voice their problems and aspirations. Public health nurses are knowledgeable about multiple strategies for intervention, whether they involve entire populations, families, or individuals. They also translate knowledge from the biological, public health, and social sciences, to individuals and population groups, through targeted interventions, programs, and advocacy.

History

The deaconesses of the church of 17th century Europe laid the foundation for modern day public health

nursing.⁴ Florence Nightingale was trained by the deaconesses in Germany in the 19th century. They actually developed what we now call continuous or comprehensive care, by incorporating home care with hospital care. This early program was called “district nursing.” It was after her training and return to England that Florence Nightingale influenced entrepreneur, William Rathbone (whose terminally ill wife had been cared for by a Nightingale trained nurse,) to begin a district nursing program in Liverpool, England. This model of care was the first public health nursing model introduced in the U.S., where it was renamed “visiting nursing.”

The first organized public health nursing service was the Henry Street Settlement in New York City.⁵ Founders Lillian Wald and Mary Brewster began visiting the sick poor at home in 1893, and settlement houses such as Henry Street became the center of health care and social welfare. The American Red Cross, through a rural nursing service, moved home care outside the larger cities, with occupational health nursing, school nursing, social service nurses, and nurses working in official public health departments all becoming part of the realm of public health nursing by 1919.

Public Health Nursing Today

If you prefer a less structured work environment and more autonomous practice, are interested in the prevention and monitoring of public health problems, and want to make a difference in your community, then public health nursing is for you. There is a wealth of opportunities for nurses who wish to work in the community, from home health to occupational health and school health nursing. Opportunities abound in the more traditional public health care facilities to home health agencies, nursing homes, corporate headquarters, HMOs, neighborhood clinics, rehabilitation facilities, and more. There are also distinctive new roles for public health nurses, such as parish nursing, infection control, and forensic nursing, in which nurses

work in correctional facilities, as nurse coroners, nurse investigators, and as sexual assault nurse examiners.

Public health nurses need many skills and a breadth and depth of knowledge to work in the community. Preferred skills are: advocacy, critical thinking, strong verbal and written communications skills, and flexibility and collaborative skills.

Career Opportunities

There are four nursing organizations dedicated to public/community health nursing, called the “Quad Council.” The Council has recently developed a document that outlines the level of knowledge and skill required for each competency a public health nurse must have to be an effective nurse in the community. (See resources.)

There are a variety of state, local, and national positions nurses can attain in public health nursing such as staff nurse, supervisor, program manager, infection control investigator, chief nurse, commissioner of health, state health officer, case manager, policy analyst, consultant, researcher, faculty member, and dean. Public health nurses also have career opportunities with the American Red Cross, the United States Public Health Service, the World Health Organization, the National Health Services Corp, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, municipal and county health departments, and other settings.

All baccalaureate programs in nursing prepare students for basic public health nursing, but some public health nursing positions require master’s or doctoral education. If you are interested in a career in public health nursing, research the schools and colleges of nursing with masters programs in public health nursing. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing in Washington, D.C. has a listing of these programs. (See Resources). The National League for Nursing in New York City is another resource. A master’s degree usually takes 12-24 months, with doctoral programs ranging from 3-5 years. Some nurses attend a combined program in a school of public health and a college of nursing,

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and receive a joint master's degree in nursing and public health.

We hope many of you will consider a career in public health nursing, and that this article has encouraged you to research this field further. There is no time like the present to consider the rewarding career of public health nurse. ■

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resources

www.aacn.nche.edu

American Association of Colleges of Nursing

www.apha.org

American Public Health Association

www.nln.org

National League for Nursing

www.phsc.org

Public Health Student Caucus, American Public Health Association

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The Public Health Workforce Enumeration 2000. Bureau of Health Professions, National Center for Health Workforce Information and Analysis