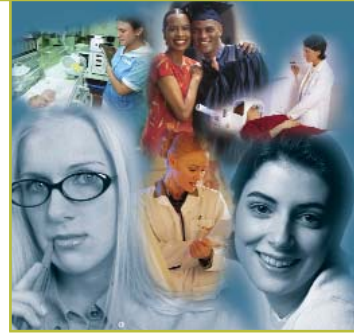


# OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NURSING



by Susan A. Randolph

*Poor employee health costs business about \$1 trillion annually, so business executives look to OHNs to maximize employee productivity and reduce costs...*

Occupational health nurses (OHNs) deliver health and safety programs and services to workers and community groups. They focus on promotion and restoration of health, prevention of illness

and injury, and protection from work-related and environmental hazards. On any given day, the OHS consults with executives about the health of the company's employees and safety conditions in the workplace; helps employees file insurance claims for job-related injuries; coordinates employee disability requests; and administers inoculations for everything from tuberculosis to hepatitis.

The first record of occupational and environmental health nursing in the United States dates back to 1888, when a nurse named Betty Moulder cared for Pennsylvania coal miners and their families.<sup>1</sup> The profession evolved with the growth of industry in the early 20th century, as factories employed nurses to combat the spread of infectious diseases like tuberculosis, to address health-related problems resulting from labor shortages during World War I, and to cut costs rising from new workers' compensation legislation.<sup>2</sup> Today, the scope of the OHN's practice has expanded to include health promotion and emergency preparedness related issues.

OHNs are RNs licensed to practice in the states in which they are employed. Typically, nurses entering the

field have a baccalaureate degree in nursing and experience in community health, ambulatory care, critical care or emergency nursing. Certification in occupational and environmental health nursing is highly recommended.

## A Seat at the Table

Poor employee health costs business about \$1 trillion annually, so business executives look to OHNs to maximize employee productivity and reduce costs.<sup>3</sup> Through their recognized value to business, OHNs commonly take a seat at the management table, providing input about staffing and budget issues and corporate policies and procedures that positively impact worker health and safety, thus maximizing the bottom line.

Many OHNs enjoy their field, as it offers the opportunity for advancement and diversity, from clinician to educator, and from case manager to corporate director and consultant, for example. Occupational health nursing also allows nurses to provide input into day-to-

day business issues, which would not be the case in the typical hospital setting. The job opportunities for OHNs have expanded greatly in recent years, and include:

- **Case management.** In addition to providing treatment, follow-up, referrals, and emergency care for job-related injuries and illnesses, OHNs act as gatekeepers for health services, rehabilitation, return-to-work and case management issues, and are key to employers' health care quality and cost containment strategies.

- **Counseling and crisis intervention.** OHNs often counsel patients on issues ranging from substance abuse to family problems. They also handle referrals to employee assistance programs and/or other community resources and coordinate follow-up care.



• **Health promotion.** OHNs teach skills and develop health education programs that encourage workers to take responsibility for their own health. Preventive strategies include the following educational programs: smoking cessation, exercise and fitness, nutrition and weight control, stress management, control of chronic illnesses, and effective use of medical services.

• **Legal and regulatory compliance.** OHNs work with employers on compliance with regulations and laws affecting the workplace, from OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health) regulations, to laws that affect the workplace such as the Family



Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

• **Worker and workplace hazard detection.** OHNs monitor the health status of worker populations by conducting research on the effects of workplace exposures and using the data to help prevent injury and illness.

## Wearing Two Hats The Environmental Health Concern

According to the World Health Organization, “environmental health” refers to the theory and practice of assessing and controlling factors in the environment that can potentially affect the health of people in the workplace and ultimately, the larger community.<sup>4</sup> Many OHNs are beginning to integrate environmental health into their practice settings, and they are in the perfect position to do so. They can conduct occupational and environmental health histories, determine actual and potential environmental hazards, control exposures, and educate the working community about these hazards.

## HOW TO GET CERTIFIED

The American Board for Occupational Health Nurses, Inc. (ABOHN) is the sole certifying body for occupational and environmental health nurses in the United States. ABOHN uses the definition of occupational and environmental health nursing and the standards of practice, in addition to other criteria, to determine eligibility for certification. The American Association of Occupational Health Nurses, Inc. (AAOHN), the national professional association for occupational and environmental health nurses, establishes the definition and standards of specialty practice.

ABOHN offers three credentials, COHN (Certified Occupational Health Nurse), COHN-S (Certified Occupational Health Nurse-Specialist) and the COHN/CM (Certified Occupational Health Nurse/Case Manager) or the COHN-S/CM (Certified Occupational Health Nurses-Specialist/Case Manager).

The COHN is offered to those registered nurses with associate, diploma or higher degrees or their international equivalent. The focus of this credential is on the nurse's role as a clinician; it also reflects the nurse's role as advisor, coordinator and case manager. The COHN-S is offered to those occupational health nurses with a baccalaureate or higher degree and reflects the nurse's role in direct care, management, education, consulting, and case management. A baccalaureate in nursing is not required for this credential.

Those interested in becoming certified should contact ABOHN for an application package at <http://www.abohn.org>. (Certification examination content is based on the results of research designed to identify the tasks and knowledge required to practice in the specialty of occupational health nursing. This method has resulted in a valid and highly reliable examination.)

AAOHN offers the Core Curriculum Study Guide, widely used by nurses preparing for certification exams. For more information on preparing for the certification exams, see [http://www.aohn.org/marketplace/study\\_guide.cfm](http://www.aohn.org/marketplace/study_guide.cfm).

## The Future of the Profession

There are a number of trends in the workplace that affect how occupational and environmental health nurses deliver services. OHNs are dealing with an older workforce that is beginning to experience health-related problems associated with aging.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, OHNs are taking on a bigger role with disease management and health and wellness programs. In addition to changes in the makeup and nature of the workforce, the responsibilities of OHNs are changing. The workplace is becoming a primary delivery system for protecting workers from new human, natural and technological threats. OHNs will play a critical role in the future to help prevent, assess, and respond to these threats. It is essential that OHNs respond and adapt to these external trends, and work with business managers and community groups to contribute to the health and safety of all employees. ■

### REFERENCES

1. Rogers, B. Occupational Health Nursing Concepts and Practice. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1994, pp.22-23
2. *Op Cit p. 24*

3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Prevention makes common "cents."* Retrieved October 31, 2003 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/health/prevention/>
4. World Health Organization. *Protection of the human environment.* Retrieved Oct. 31 from <http://www.who.int/phe/en/>
5. American Association of Retired Persons. (2001). Retrieved October 31, 2003 from [http://research.aarp.org/econ/ib49\\_health.pdf](http://research.aarp.org/econ/ib49_health.pdf)

## resources

**www.aohn.org**  
the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses

**www.osha.gov**  
Occupational Safety & Health Administration

**www.dol.gov**  
U.S. Dept of Labor



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