

Nurse's Role as an Environmental Activist

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A healthy environment is fundamental to life, and attention to the effects of the environment on human health is essential if we are to achieve the goal of health for all. As nurses working in the health care profession we have a responsibility to the people of the world to be an environmental health activist and raise awareness of the health implications of environmental changes, to support policies to reduce health vulnerability and to build capacity to adapt to climate change (WHO, 2005). The following paper will address the nurse's role as an environmental activist. This will be discussed in the context of environmental health advocacy in the home, community and workplace regarding clean water, food and air. The nurse's role in advocating for vulnerable populations will also be discussed.

Nurses are in an excellent position to provide leadership in implementing the principles of reduce, reuse, recycle, recover and re-educate in the workplace. In individual practice this could involve minimizing paper and other office waste, avoiding indiscriminate use of disposable equipment, using energy as efficiently as possible, recycling plastic containers and other recyclable material, observing safe disposal practices, encouraging health facilities to adopt environmentally-friendly organizational policies (CNA, 2006).

Health care professionals need to be conscious of the environmental choices their organizations make. They have a responsibility to learn how they can minimize the negative ecological effects of their work. Health care professionals and their organizations need to begin to look at areas such as energy conservation, pollution

prevention, resources conservation, solid waste reduction, good indoor air quality and environmentally responsible design and management (CNA, 2006).

In addition to environmental responsibility at the practice level, nurses should serve as catalysts for change by becoming involved in activities in the community, such as advocating that decision-makers review the environmental impact of a proposed project before approving it. As nurses, it is our responsibility to raise the flag when people's health is at stake (RNAO, 2007). Health care professionals are very influential and they have the ability to work all over the globe, which allows them to educate many people on the effects of climate change on their health.

Nurses can also begin to teach people about the small changes they can make in their homes that will have a huge impact on the environment. Turning off electrical devices not in use, hanging the laundry outside to dry, driving a fuel efficient car, use energy efficient light bulbs, walking to work, planting a tree, bringing your own bags to the grocery store, recycling, and by supporting environmentally friendly companies will help decrease waste, reduce toxic emissions and reduce greenhouse gases going into our atmosphere (Hunt, 2007). It is important for companies who manufacture environmentally friendly products to price them so they are available to majority of people. We cannot expect people to purchase environmentally safe products if they are almost double the price of the other choices.

Nurses especially have a huge responsibility to begin addressing the global environmental changes because it will have a vast impact on the nursing profession. Nursing resources will be severely stressed in many places, such as high-density populations, areas most affected by the environmental changes and poor and vulnerable

populations (Hunt, 2007). The very old, the very young and the immune-compromised will be most effected by environmental change because they are more susceptibly to disease and they lack the proper resources and support. It is important for nurses to develop and implement health promotion strategies that meet the needs of all individuals in the community. This will increase the coping capacity of the community. By involving these individuals in health promotion strategies they will feel as though they are an important part of the community. It will also increase their self-esteem and they will be more informed about their health.

Nursing education and practice needs to evolve in order to adequately deal with the increase in environmental health issues. Nurses should be well prepared to identify and assess potential environmental health issues related to workplace, neighbourhoods, houses and schools. Nurses should know where to go to find current and credible information. Nurses should be prepared to investigate and act when they see patterns of environmental health issues. The building and maintaining of public health infrastructure is very important, cost-effective and urgently needed. This includes public health training, more effective surveillance and emergency response systems, and sustainable prevention and control programs. These will enhance a population's coping ability and may protect against current climatic variability as well as against future climatic changes. They will be especially important for vulnerable populations with little current coping capacity (WHO, 2000).

If governments are serious about improving our environment, they must divert resources from polluting and traditional energy sources. All of us have an obligation to reduce our consumption, but it is up to our own governments to lead the way with

policies that help us all realize this goal (RNAO, 2007). The Royal Society of Canada (1995) recommends that all members of the biomedical science community and all practicing health care professionals are made aware of the importance of health issues associated with global environmental changes and of the action needed to minimize the impact of global change. Nursing professional organizations need to support research on the public health and disease impacts of global warming. They need to research and draw up publicly available policy documents on the long-term assessment of the impact of climate change on the need for nursing and on the nursing profession (CNA, 2006).

Increasing population, urbanization and industrialization around the world places enormous stress on our ecosystem, which effects the quality of air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and the availability of the resources we consume to maintain our lifestyles. Global health depends on safe drinking water, sufficient food, clean air, secure shelter and secure social conditions. The right to a healthy environment requires a healthy human habitat, including clean water, air, and soil that are free from toxins or hazards that threaten human health (Centre for Economic and Social Rights, 2007).

Without these necessities there will be an increase in death and disease. It is our responsibility as nurses to advocate for global human health and to ensure that every person has access to clean water, air and food. Nurses must work to educate their clients their community and legislators on the issues of clean air food and water and address the health impacts so that the government will see the need for change globally and locally. Nurses can work with legislators at any level to create and implement policies that will lead to clean air, water, food and environment. Nurses must support food procurement

policies that are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible (Health Care Without Harm, 2007).

Health professionals should encourage greater environmental responsibility in all people, and begin by setting the example of responsibility in their own personal and professional lives (CNA, 2006). It is important for nurses to be involved in any issue that effects global human health, especially an issue as serious as global environmental change. It is important for nurses to remember they do not need to have a PhD to be an advocate of environmental health. Nurses need to advocate for programs such as the American Nurses Association's program; "RN No Harm", which help nurses to identify environmental problems, understand their role in risk assessment and management, communicate potential environmental threats to policymakers and the public, and work to reduce or eliminate risks (American Nurses Association, 2007). Nursing associations have a responsibility to protect nurses and their patients by educating RNs about environmental risks and ways to effectively address them in their workplaces and communities. Nurses and patients are exposed to many environmental risks. We need to be strong advocates for clean air and water, now more than ever (American Nurses Association, 2007).

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