Title: The Nurse’s Role as an Environmental Activist

College: The Ohio State University College of Nursing

Name: Ryan Thebo

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Nursing Contact: Laureen H. Smith, PhD, RN
Environmental health can be thought of as freedom from illness or injury in relation to environmental conditions and toxic agents. This area of health addresses all the external environmental factors to the person such as physical, chemical, psychosocial, and biological. Each of these key factors is likely influenced by the other. By controlling these environmental factors, the nurse can prevent disease and create healthy environments. When advocating for vulnerable populations, the nurse might use investigative skills to determine the source of the contamination (Stanhope, M. & Lancaster, J, 2008).

In contributing to environmental health, Florence Nightingale is considered to be one of the earliest advocators for environmental health. She recognized the environment as playing a significant role in the health of the population. During the 1850’s she stressed the importance of developing sanitary codes for hospitals and identified five factors (pure air, pure water, cleanliness, light, and efficient drainage) for nurses to consider in optimizing the physical environment of the ill person. This philosophy likely had a significant impact on the health of the British soldiers in the hospitals. Given the little understanding and appreciation for environmental health during that time period, she would be considered ahead of her time in her understanding of the environmental impact on health (Gerber, D. & McGuire, S, 1999).

Lillian Wald was also instrumental in bringing environmental health into the practice of nursing. She is considered to be one of the founders of modern public health. He advocated for sewage and sanitation laws and established milk stations in New York City which provided safe milk for infants and children. This likely had a significant impact on the health of the infants, since many of the diseases during his time were due to pathogens in milk. He also built grounds and started fresh air camps in the country to assist children in avoiding environmental hazards of the city (Gerber, D. & McGuire, S, 1999).
Mary Breckenridge also played a significant role in advancing environmental health nursing. She founded the Frontier Nursing Service which used environmental principles in their work. When building a hospital in rural Kentucky, she took into consideration the environment when deciding where to place the hospital. She knew that the building site should have a source of clean water, be away from outdoor privies that could contaminate wells, be far away from noise, and have adequate amounts of light. By advocating for environmental health, she was able to reduce infant mortality by incorporating these principles into her community health nursing practice (Gerber, D. & McGuire, S, 1999).

During the first half of the 20th century, nurses continued to play a significant part in advocating for healthy environmental conditions. Nurses often participated in public health campaigns which helped to curb enteric diseases through sanitation reforms, immunization, and improve occupational health through more stringent workplace safety and legislation. However, after World War II, the focus of environmental health advocacy in America seemed to shift away from primary prevention (e.g. modification of the environment). Medicine began focused on disease treatment and specialized areas of medicine. As hospitals assumed a greater role in the care of ill people and as nurses were more frequently employed at institutional settings, less emphasis came to be placed on the importance of the environment on health well into the 1970’s (Gerber, D. & McGuire, S, 1999).

In the more recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of the nurse in preventing poor health outcomes related to the environment. According to a 1995 report by the Institute of Medicine, the environment has been shown to be a significant determinant of health and is deeply rooted in nursing’s heritage. This recent report called for basic environmental health competencies for all nurses. It emphasized exposure assessment and risk reduction
activities. The findings were that all nurses should be able to understand the relationship between individuals or populations and the environment, make appropriate referrals, and take an environmental health history. In addition, there was also a need for nurses to demonstrate knowledge about advocacy, and risk (IOM CEECNP, 1995).

When advocating for patients, the nurse may be involved with environmental health as an informed citizen, as an adjunct to existing roles, or as full-time work. Nurses who are advocates for environmental health may also work in commissions, develop articles, or conduct research in order to gain a stronger insight into the effect of the environment on humans. With an increased awareness of the environmental impact on populations, the nurse may include environmental exposures as part of the history assessment. Based on the temporal and geographical relationships to exposures, the nurse can then identify health hazards. Policy development is another role that more environmental health nurses are beginning to take part in. This involves proposing, informing, and monitoring through the use of agencies, communities, and organization perspectives (Stanhope, M. & Lancaster, J, 2008).

Nurses are in a unique position to advocate for the patient since they constitute the largest single body of health care workers and typically have direct contact with the public daily. The Environmental Health Nurse may function as part of the surveillance system when they see patients in a wide variety of practice settings (e.g. emergency rooms, private homes, and occupational settings). In all of these settings, nurses can use their assessment skills to better understand the impact of the environment on health. By better understanding these threats posed by the environment, nurses can then implement their plans for action and evaluate the impact of care on the environment. For instance, medical waste (e.g. mercury) and unhealthy products may be contributing to adverse outcomes. By reducing the use of thermometers and
sphygmomanometers that contain mercury, this will reduce the risk of toxic exposure (Stanhope, M. & Lancaster, J, 2008).

As an advocate, the nurse refers vulnerable populations to specialized environmental services and connects them to community resources. Historically, environmental health nurses have advocated for clients in a variety of settings (e.g. homes, occupational settings, hospitals, and schools) which has allowed them to witness firsthand the importance of physical, biological, chemical, and psychosocial surroundings on health. There has been a recent shift in the focus of nursing practice toward a better understanding in how the environment impacts the determinants of health. With this more recent change in the focus of nursing practice, one would expect to see an increase in advocacy by nurses for better environmental living conditions and safer work environments.
References

