Change is Possible:

A Reflection on Environmental Health Advocacy in Nursing

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Introduction

As my final term of baccalaureate nursing studies draws to a close, only now do I fully appreciate how my experiences in environmental health advocacy have enriched my nursing practice. Before reflecting on these activities, I first offer a brief overview of environmental health in nursing, highlighting the importance of this growing field within the nursing profession.

Environmental Health in Nursing

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), environmental health is one of the many pillars of human health, and includes:

... all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments. This definition excludes behaviour not related to environment, as well as behaviour related to the social and cultural environment, and genetics (WHO, 2012).

Demonstrating the interconnectedness between the environment and human health, the WHO approximates that roughly a quarter of disease worldwide is caused by environmental determinants, and that a myriad of specific illnesses, including cancers, cardiovascular diseases, and respiratory infections, are associated with environmental risk factors (WHO, 2006). Coupled with the fact that the Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses encourages nurses to advocate for “environmental preservation and restoration” (Canadian Nurses’ Association, 2008, p. 20), this high prevalence of environmentally-linked disease provides strong rationale for the study of environmental health through a nursing lens.

Environmental Advocacy as a Nursing Student

During my time in nursing school, I have had the privilege of working alongside three nursing luminaries and other activists on various environmental health initiatives. My primary
involvement has been as an Executive Committee (EC) member of Ontario Nurses for the Environ-
ment Interest Group (ONEIG), a position I began in April 2011. An interest group of the Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario (RNAO), ONEIG’s mission is “to illuminate the link between the environment and health, and to promote healthy, sustainable environments through nursing leadership.” Since forming in December 2010, ONEIG has passed resolutions at RNAO and the Canadian Nurses’ Association (CNA), co-lead a presentation on alternative energy, and written two newsletters for our members, among other activities. Ostensibly, the recent swelling of our membership from 80 to over 500 in approximately seven months is a testament to how important environmental health issues are to nurses and nursing students.

My initial position on the ONEIG EC was that of Website and Technology Executive Network Officer. In this role, I created a group Facebook page to better inform our membership about environmental health issues and events, wrote two brief articles on the topic of campus sustainability, formatted our two newsletters, and lead ongoing research about ONEIG’s prospective website. I also attended regular EC meetings and co-represented ONEIG at RNAO’s Membership Assembly in September 2011.

As a result of an unexpected opening on our EC, I became President-Elect of ONEIG in January 2012. My roles now include supporting the President in her duties and communicating more frequently with RNAO Home Office staff. Most recently, I co-represented ONEIG at RNAO’s annual “Queen’s Park Day,” which gives nurses and nursing students the opportunity to meet with Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) to discuss health-related policy matters. During a question and answer period, I had the opportunity to ask the Leader of the Official Opposition about his party’s position on nuclear energy. He responded in favour of nuclear
power, which prompted me to write him a follow-up letter on ONEIG’s behalf that stressed the availability of other safer and renewable energy sources, such as water and wind.

In addition to my involvement with ONEIG, I am currently completing my community nursing placement at Toronto Environmental Alliance, or TEA. Founded in 1988, TEA is a grassroots advocacy group that focuses on urban environmental issues (TEA, 2008). Anchored by six campaigns, one of which centers on the accessibility and affordability of public transit, TEA’s outreach efforts seek to build a greener and more socially equitable Toronto (TEA, 2008). In my role as a public transit intern, I have written updates for one of TEA’s associated websites, attended a transit brainstorming meeting at Toronto’s City Hall, and helped design a flyer that speaks to the environmental and social benefits of public transit. As well, my major project for the term has revolved around the implementation of light-rail transit (LRT) in Toronto, an issue that has caused division and confusion amongst many city residents. Last week, to address this issue, I engaged in community outreach within a suburban neighbourhood of Toronto, visiting local organizations, apartment buildings, and churches to discuss the advantages of LRT over subways. From a community nursing perspective, this outreach activity hopefully helped build capacity among local residents, so that they may feel better informed of the facts in the face of widespread misinformation in the media. This is but one example that reveals the frequent link between social and environmental justice.

These environmental health activities have helped me build confidence and have provided me with much needed perspective during periods of school-related stress. Occasionally, the positions I have been afforded over the past year have also made me question whether I am qualified enough to hold leadership roles at such an early stage in my practice. When this type of self-doubt arises, I remind myself of some of the many assets that I and other nursing students
bring to the burgeoning discipline of environmental health, including energy, enthusiasm, hard work, and a deep-seated belief that institutional change is possible. For these reasons, nursing students’ perspectives are invaluable to the development and evolution of the environmental health field.

**Conclusion**

As poignantly stated by Falk-Raphael (2005), “nurses practice at the intersection of public policy and personal lives…” (p. 222). As such, it behooves the nursing community to engage in environmental health advocacy in order to improve the health of both individuals and the population at large. As a result of their energy and healthy sense of idealism, nursing students play a special role in environmental health advocacy, and as such, should never underestimate the change they can help facilitate in the field.
References


