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Public Health Nursing - Where Did it Come From?

Early records of humankind hold many stories which reflect efforts to insure the safety and health for large groups of people. Examples range from religious ceremonies to commonly held beliefs about the origin of sickness and man's many creative efforts to intervene. Ancient sewage pipes, amulets and long-held cultural practices are testimony to attempts to assure conditions in which people could be healthy. The early history of the United States includes efforts to clean harbors, care for special populations and quarantine the sick. The history of public health shows it carries both a responsibility and burden not shared by any other field of endeavor.

The public health nursing workforce is dedicated to providing care to all individuals of a community, but often take the primary responsibility for those who are uninsured or poor. As persons without advocates or resources filled public health clinics in the past, nurses changed their focus from public protection, prevention of disease, and care of persons at special risk to clinical care for any person who was poor. From its inception, the profession of nursing has adopted a holistic approach toward health promotion and prevention of illness and injury. Florence Nightingale founded modern nursing on the belief that the nurse's role was primarily to modify the environment in ways that enhanced health and healing. In Nightingale's view, any factor that could affect the health of the patient and the health of the public was relevant to nursing practice.

Lillian Wald was first to use the term "public health nurse", when visiting nurses provided direct care to the sick in their homes. These nurses not only cared for the ill but also taught families basic hygiene, sanitation and health practices. It was apparent that the well-being of the families depended most significantly on their environment. Public health and nursing are rooted in prevention of disease and disability. Care was first provided to populations of persons and included environmental improvement, access to health teaching and education, and clinical care itself. Development of community services resulted from identification of need when caring for families and/or populations.

The profession of public health nursing is over 100 years old and public health nurses have become very skilled at collecting and analyzing information about individuals, families and communities. They are typically trusted and valued by clients, agencies and private providers. This trust provides public health nurses with ready access to client populations that are usually difficult to engage. Additionally, public health nurses have immediate knowledge of current and emerging health issues through daily contact with the high risk populations they serve.

Public health nurses operate within the Core Public Health Functions of: Assessment, Policy Development and Assurance. Public health nurses perform the assessment function when they: identify target populations which may be at risk, participate in data collection on a target population, analyze data on needs of specific populations, evaluate a specific family's strengths and areas of concern, identify individuals within a family who are in need of services, and develop a nursing care plan for the individual and the family.

A public health nurse performs the policy development function when she/he: recommends specific training and programs to meet identified health needs, acts as an advocate for target populations who are not willing or able to speak to policy makers about issues of concern, recommends new or increased services to families based on identified needs, makes recommendations to policy makers about specific issues affecting clusters of families; and recommends or assists in the development of standards for individual clients.

And finally, a public health nurse performs the function of assurance when they: provide services to target populations, such as minority communities, young parents, and schools; maintains safe levels of communicable disease surveillance and outbreak control, provides public health nursing consultation in the community, provides care in a nursing clinic, and provides nursing services based on standards of nursing practice to individuals across the age continuum with programs such as "Help Me Grow", Bureau for Children with Medical Handicaps, immunizations, diabetes education, general screening clinics, and school nursing

In summary, public health nurses have continued to grow and learn as the society they care for does the same. Nursing care for a community can be compared to the care provided a large diverse family. Just as individuals needs are identified and addressed within the family group, the needs of individual communities require identification and interventions. Public health nursing must constantly devote energy to the ever-changing, diverse needs of the community. Nursing care of communities must be population focused and because all public health is local, it must start with the local health department and in tum with the public health nurses.

If you have any questions about public health nursing or the nursing services that are provided by the Knox County Health Department, contact Health Commissioner Julie Miller at jemiller@knoxhealth.com or Director of Nursing, Jackie Fletcher, at jfletcher@knoxhealth.com