



# RNAO *Practice Page*

## *on Public Health Nursing* *Putting the Spotlight on Practice News*



### **Public Health Nursing: Nursing Practice in a Diverse Environment**

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### ***What Is Public Health Nursing?***

Public health nurses have the unique distinction of practicing in “a setting without walls”.<sup>1</sup> The broad range of skills that they bring to practice, such as counseling, teaching, advocacy and community development, not only make a difference to individuals, families, and groups, but can effect change at a community level. Although they only make up about 2.5% of all registered nurses in the province<sup>2</sup>, public health nurses can be found across Ontario, protecting and promoting the health of populations. They do this by considering the many factors (physiological, emotional, social, political, spiritual, historical, cultural and environmental) that can affect the health of communities and those who live within them<sup>3</sup>. For public health nurses, the “client” is the individual, family, group, community, and the population.

Public health nursing practice requires the ability to “synthesize... knowledge from public health science, nursing science, and the social sciences”<sup>4</sup> to effect change at an individual, family and community level. By intervening “upstream”, PHNs help people change and avoid factors that will interfere with their health both now and in the future.<sup>5</sup> “Public health nurses integrate their knowledge with clinical understanding of the health and illness patterns of individuals and families within the population. They recognize that a community’s health is inextricably linked with the health of its constituent members and is often reflected first in individual and family health experiences.”<sup>6</sup>

For example, public health nurses work in schools collaborating with school staff, parents and pupils to identify key health issues for the school community, such as promoting healthy eating and active living, addressing school safety or prevention of bullying, and developing strategies to address the issues identified. Public health nurses also work with at-risk populations such as new residents to Canada, people living in poverty and homeless people. Their roles include offering support, linking and referral to community resources, and advocacy to assist individuals and families in finding safe housing, secure employment and other necessary supports.<sup>7</sup>

“Public health nursing in Ontario is rooted in the traditions of Nightingale, Jeanne Mance, women in religious orders, such as the Grey Nuns, and early North American public health nurses who understood the importance of social, economic, environmental, and political determinants of health.”<sup>8</sup> They believed that “social activism and collaboration with community organizations and governments to be fundamental aspects of public health nursing practice. Past emphases on lifestyle and medicalization in public health are now being replaced with an increasing recognition of the value of integrating health promotion with primary health care approaches that address the broad determinants of health.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Public Health Nurses Promote Health**

Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase, maintain control over and improve their health as defined by the internationally recognized Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.<sup>10</sup> “Public health nurses have historically included... all five of the Charter’s health promotion strategies in their practice: creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills, building healthy public policy, and working to reorient health services.”... Health promotion in public health nursing practice, which involves a caring and a holistic approach, ...

*“occurs within the context of a trusting relationship developed between nurse and client”.*<sup>11</sup>

Public health nurses work in a wide range of settings to meet the needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, and populations. Many registered nurses, such as those involved in street health, care for clients using a public health nursing practice approach. However, in Ontario, public health nurses work for official public health agencies in one or more core program areas that are mandated by the Public Health Branch of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care. Examples include:

1.) Family Health. The health of children, youth and families is promoted through preconception health; prenatal health education; universal prenatal, postnatal, child screening, and home visits, to assess and identify children with developmental delays and families in need of support, health teaching, counseling, linking, and referral to community services; breast feeding education and support and policy development; well-baby clinics; parenting groups; coalition building and public awareness strategies. Public health nursing happens in a variety of settings: home visits, telephone counseling and information, parent/caregiver drop-in centres, health fairs, community events and so on. RNAO Best Practice Guidelines (2002) inform public health nursing practice in working with families.

2.) Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention: This includes promoting healthy and safe environments and lifestyle practices across the life span. For example, strategies such as program and policy

development, education, and community development help to build the community's capacity to promote active living, healthy eating, sun safety, smoking prevention and cessation, falls prevention, car seat safety, road and water safety, prevention of alcohol and substance abuse and home safety.

3.) Communicable Disease Control and Vaccine Prevention: Examples here include promoting sexual health and reducing or eliminating infectious diseases through immunization, infection control, health education, counseling and referral.

*A Practice Example of Public Health Nursing by Liz McHugh, PHN, Middlesex-London Health Unit.* Public health nurses from three local health units identified a goal of increasing community awareness of childhood inactivity and its impact on health. The nurses developed a campaign called *Turn Off the Screens Week*, adapted from a similar campaign in the Kingston area. It was designed to encourage elementary school children and their families to be more physically active by being "screen-free" (television, computers and video games) for 5 consecutive days. To promote this campaign, they involved students, their families, the community at large, as well as the media. The assistance of the media was key to the success of our campaign.

Eight months of extensive planning by the nurses included developing program materials for approximately 120 participating schools, media packages on childhood activity levels and comprehensive background information for nurses meeting with media contacts. World events competed for “the story of the day” but in the end this initiative received excellent newspaper and TV coverage.

Enthusiasm remained high for the students and their families in their quest for alternatives to "screen viewing" for the full 5-day period. The success of the program rested largely on the commitment of the nurses who organized a wide variety of community events to encourage children and their families to be "screen-free" for the week. Thanks to the donation of ice time by the local municipality, 300 students and their families took advantage of free skating at a local arena in the rural area. Some families picked up storm aftermath debris in local parks and many schools participated in community runs for local charities. The full evaluation will give a comprehensive picture of the impact of this program.

This labour intensive initiative is just one of many population-based strategies that public health teams are involved in. Frequently public health nurses partner with community groups or coalitions to better facilitate planning and share resources and expertise. It is generally a win-win situation for all involved. This *Turn Off the Screens Campaign* is a great example of involving the community to promote family health.

Public health nurses work with a high degree of autonomy and initiate strategies that will address the determinants of health and positively impact people and their community. The evolving practice continually adapts to the changing needs of the community being served. Public health nursing takes place where people live, work and play, making a difference to the health of communities!

## References and Suggested Resources

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