Nurses as partners in delivering public health

A paper to support the nursing contribution to public health, developed by an alliance of organisations

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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to illustrate the contribution of nurses to improving the health of the public; and to strengthen nurses’ position so that they can better influence the health of communities. The organisations represented in the Public Health Alliance endorse this statement and wish to support nurses in their public health work.

Health is a resource for daily living. It includes physical, mental and social well-being. It is determined by a range of complex and interconnected influences, many of which lie outside of health services. One definition of public health is: “The science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health, through the organised efforts and informed choices of society, organisations, public and private, communities and individuals.” (Wanless, 2007)

The aims of delivering public health through nursing services are to:

✦ increase life expectancy by influencing healthy behaviours
✦ reduce health inequalities – for example, targeting vulnerable populations to improve health outcomes and access services
✦ improve population health – for example, reducing obesity, alcohol abuse, improving sexual health behaviour
✦ increase the awareness of positive healthy behaviours in communities
✦ promote and develop social capital
✦ engage with individuals, families and communities to influence the design and development of services.

Through a wide spectrum of services, nurses can:

✦ identify individual and population health need, using assessment
✦ target their services at vulnerable individuals and communities
✦ contribute to and develop services that protect the public’s health – for example, immunisation, emergency planning and communicable disease prevention
✦ share health information to encourage individuals, families and communities to become more active in developing healthy lifestyles
✦ prevent ill health and promote health enhancing activities by working with families and individuals
✦ promote and develop action to tackle the underlying causes of ill health
✦ lead partnership working for health with other key organisations
✦ advocate for health gain in relation to all public activities – for example, housing, leisure, transport, shopping and the environment
✦ be catalysts for health, creating new resources and collaboration to sustain good health in local groups and communities, such as schools or prisons
✦ challenge vested interests that threaten public health
✦ access hard-to-reach groups, engaging them around their health hopes and fears.

When working with the public, nurses are recognised for their ability to influence behaviour change within a health promoting environment. Their achievements in public health practice have a visible and measurable impact at individual and community population levels, as the following examples illustrate.
Here are some examples of innovative work that nurses working in public health have helped to initiate

From little acorns...
Acorns is a nurse-led personal medical service (PMS) that provides comprehensive services for homeless people, travelling families, refugees and asylum seekers, who are not already registered with a GP.

Based in Grays and serving the area of Thurrock, the pilot developed from the work of a health visitor with a public health role, who identified the difficulties these communities were experiencing in accessing primary care services. In addition to health care, the practice also offers support in other areas, for example, form-filling. There is also access to Albanian, Farsi, Kurdish and Tamil interpreters.

Believe the hype
Health for Youth through Peer Education (Hype) is an innovative approach to promoting sexual health amongst young people – including those who are vulnerable and isolated – in north and west Belfast.

A unique multidisciplinary initiative, the Hype project enables peer educators to work alongside health professionals to deliver relationship and sexual health education and services to young people below the age of 25. The service is managed by Community Nursing, North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Strategic drivers include local, regional and national health strategies on sexual health.

Through partnership working with key agencies and community networks, the project aims to:
- increase the uptake of services
- reduce sexually transmitted infections
- achieve a reduction in the incidence of unintended pregnancy.

Nurse-led outreach services tailor sexual health and relationship education programmes for groups – including community and voluntary – and individuals, alongside providing updates and mentoring for staff. The nurse also contributes to the development of policies and protocols, and provides the lead in child protection issues.

A helping hand
In 2003-4, the London Nurses and Midwives’ Network undertook a project to improve the health of refugee and asylum-seeking children in the capital.

Poor communication between various health professionals in contact with these children had led to a lack of continuity of treatment and advice. A hand held record was developed, so that each child could retain information about its own health, development and history. This is incorporated into the traditional ‘red book’. Now adopted by the Department of Health, it can be accessed at: http://www.dh.uk/policyandguidance/internation/asylumseekersandrefugees

Stub it out
In Wrexham, school nurses are working collaboratively across organisations to deliver a targeted preventative service to help young people stop smoking.

Nurses work with the national public health service, local authority, youth service and specifically with youth workers who are school-based. Specifically targeted at Year 10 and 11 pupils in the local high school, school nurses run a smoking cessation group over a six-week period. They offer continuing support during drop-in sessions, including prescribing and supervising the use of nicotine patches.

Falling figures
A nurse-led project was set up to reduce the incidence of falls amongst the elderly population in Watford. Developed in collaboration with Watford and Three Rivers PCT, the National Osteoporosis Society (NOS) and local nursing and care homes, this year-long project enabled the nurses to train the staff in 16 care homes. The aim was to improve outcomes and have a positive impact on quality of life, by preventing falls and reducing admission to hospital.
Three factors contributed to the identification of a need for public health interventions. These were: the predominance of independent care homes; statistical evidence of the incidence of falls; and long waiting lists at the local hospital.

This approach to partnership working – involving health, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), local authority and independent providers – began with identifying the particular needs of the frail elderly. It enabled health visitors to engage with a vulnerable group that they rarely interact with.

Following completion of the project, there was a significant drop in both falls and fractures. Statistical findings and outcomes were presented to the CSCI. These included recommendations for the future implementation of care plans to prevent falls in homes.

Crisis prevention
A health scheme in Belfast - which has seen nurses and lay health workers visit pubs, workplaces and community centres – has been hailed as a success in helping to identify those people with chronic disease symptoms in the community.

Originally scheduled to run from September until December 2006, Casefinder has been so successful that it’s now being rolled out to more venues.

The scheme was launched by Belfast district nurses, in partnership with the East Belfast Community Health Information Project (EBCHIP), and supported by London-based charity, The Queen’s Nursing Institute. Casefinder has recruited and trained local lay health workers to work alongside district nursing staff.

Using a specially designed health screening tool to identify people at risk of serious illness, nurses and EBCHIP volunteers have already pin-pointed various potential problems - such as previously undiagnosed cases of diabetes and high blood pressure. In essence, the project is helping to detect chronic disease symptoms before a problem becomes a crisis.

**Casefinder offers local people:**
✦ an on-the-spot nursing assessment by a district nurse
✦ individual and specific health advice
✦ a comprehensive health information pack
✦ onward referral, where appropriate.

**Chatter boosts parenting skills**
The Chatterbox initiative was set up by a group of health visitors in Plymouth who identified a gap in services for young families who wanted to be able to meet up for advice and support.

**The aims of the project were to:**
✦ enable local parents to enhance their parenting skills, by spending quality time with their children in a safe and stimulating environment
✦ provide health promoting information and advice across a wide range of topics
✦ support self-care and independence.

Funding was secured through area regeneration monies, in collaboration with the local public health department and social services family centre. Health visitors targeted services to those in need, taking the lead in developing local partnerships. The end result is that a local group of young parents have been enabled to take ownership for their learning, while alliances across organisations have been created.

**Reaching out in Wrexham**
In Wrexham, the local gypsy and traveller community has been helped to access health care via an outreach service provided from a mobile unit.

A project health worker, health visitor and researcher work together to provide services that respond to identified needs. Advice about housing, healthy lifestyles and general information are available at every intervention. Meanwhile the health workers feed information back into the system, at both a health and local authority level.
Conclusion

Improving the public’s health is a key role for all nurses, yet it is acknowledged that this is not an activity that lies solely within the health domain. A multidisciplinary approach is likely to achieve the ultimate aim, by increasing awareness of and responsibility for health; preventing illness; ensuring equal access to health services; and tackling inequalities.

The impact of other health determinants needs to be addressed simultaneously. This requires public health nurses to be creative, embracing innovative ways to work in new partnerships, whilst adopting a health behaviour approach to health improvement.
The UK’s key public health policy drivers

Department of Health 2004, Choosing health
Department of Health 2006, Our health, our care, our say
Scottish Executive 2003, Improving health in Scotland
Welsh Assembly Government 2002, Well-being in Wales
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 2002, Investing in health

Here are the websites for organisations that form the Public Health Alliance

✦ Amicus and the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors’ Association (CPHVA): http://www.amicustheunion.org
✦ Nursing and Midwifery Council: www.nmc-uk.org
✦ Royal College of Nursing: www.rcn.org.uk
✦ The Queen’s Nursing Institute: www.qni.org.uk
✦ Unison: www.unison.org.uk
✦ United Kingdom Public Health Association (UKPHA): www.ukpha.org.uk

References

www.euro.who.int/AboutWHO/Policy/20010828_4