Practice Profile

Public Health Nursing

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A day in the life

Sonya is a public health nurse who arrives at her office today and sees the message light on her phone flashing. She checks her messages suspecting the message might have been left by her client, Ms Lee, who is suffering from post partum mood disorder (PPMD). Public health nurses in her office often identify women who are at risk for or, experiencing postpartum depression. The impact can be devastating for the family. Ms Lee was calling today to ask Sonya if there are any programs in her area for women with similar problems.

Over the past month Sonya has been collaborating with other public health nurses to submit a proposal to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, to develop a Postpartum Depression Project that will help improve the health of women at risk or with Post Partum Mood Disorders (PPMD). Today Sonya plans to meet with her colleagues to draft a budget for this proposal.

Sonya speaks with her manager about modifying the health unit’s current prenatal class curriculum to include information and skill building exercises to recognize the signs and symptoms of PPMD.

As a PHN who helps the immunization team during busy times, Sonya participated in the annual flu campaign at her health unit earlier this year. As she finishes writing her report, Sonya feels proud of her contribution to keeping the people who lived in her community healthy in such a concrete way.

Afterwards, Sonya spends time working on a presentation to the PPMD Coalition. Sonya reflects on how much had been accomplished since the coalition of 20 community agencies formed 12 months ago. This group has held health fairs, professional education sessions, developed and distributed resources to professionals and the public, and developed a website. The group also did television, radio & posters to help the public to understand PPMD.

Other public health nurse colleagues created and staffed a local central phone service for postpartum women and a drop-in service for postpartum women and their families was also established. Sonya returns Mrs. Lee’s call and suggests that she participate in the program.

Sonya then checks her email and finds a few notes from her colleagues in neighbouring local health units. Together the group had identified a goal of increasing community awareness of childhood inactivity and its impact on obesity and health. The nurses plan to collaborate to develop a campaign called “Turn off the Screens Week”, adapted from a similar campaign in another region.

It will be designed to encourage elementary school children and their families to be more physically active by being "screen-free" (television, computers and video games) for five consecutive days. To promote this campaign, public health nurses visit schools to involve students, their families, the community at large, as well as the media.

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” will be a great example of involving the community to promote family health.

Public health nursing involves working with individuals, families, communities, and at a systems
level. It is through this comprehensive and strengths-based approach that empowerment and enduring positive change can be realized.

Background
Public health nursing in Ontario is rooted in the traditions of Florence Nightingale, Jeanne Mance, and women in religious orders such as the Grey Nuns. Early North American public health nurses understood the importance of social, economic, environmental, and political determinants of health, and believed that social activism and collaboration with community organizations and governments was a fundamental aspect of public health nursing practice. Although in 2010, public health nurses (PHN) make up less than 2.87% of all registered nurses in the province, they can be found across Ontario, protecting and promoting health. They do this by considering the many factors: physiological, emotional, social, political, spiritual, historical, cultural and environmental, which can affect the health of communities and those who live within them. For PHNs, a “client” can be defined as an individual, family, group, community, population, system and/or society.

Specialty Education
Public health nurses (PHN) are registered nurses with a baccalaureate degree in nursing. Practicing PHNs have the opportunity to take the CNA certification exam for community health nursing to acquire the designation CCHN(C). Public health nursing practice is guided by provincial regulatory standards, community health nursing standards of practice, core competencies for public health and public health nursing competencies. The Canadian Community Health Nursing Standards of Practice (CCHN) form the basis of community health nursing practice. Public health nursing competencies are the integrated knowledge, skills, judgement and attributes required of a public health nurse to practice safely and ethically.

Scope of Practice
The focus of public health intervention is to prevent rather than treat a disease through health promotion activities such as creating supportive environments, and advocacy for healthy public policy, strengthening community action, developing personal skills and reorienting health services towards a health care system which contributes to the pursuit of health.

Public health nurses require the ability to “synthesize... knowledge from public health science, primary health care (including the determinants of health), nursing science, and theory and knowledge of the social sciences to promote, protect, and preserve the health of populations.”

In Ontario, public health nurses work for official public health agencies in one or more core program areas, many of which are mandated by the Public Health Division of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. These program areas include but are not limited to: chronic disease and injury prevention; family health; school health, sexual health, immunization, and communicable disease control.

Public health nurses collaborate with other public health practitioners such as: nutrition professionals, dentists, physicians, health promoters, public health inspectors, epidemiologists and other health professionals in the delivery of public health services. One important example of collaboration is seen in disease outbreaks such as SARS and pandemic planning for H1N1. PHNs are not only involved in communicable disease control work such as contact tracing, immunization and health education but they also address the social determinants of health such as poverty and homelessness which contribute to poor health.

Public health nurses use a broad range of skills in daily practice, such as individual counseling, individual and group teaching/facilitation, advocacy, social marketing, community development and healthy public policy development that not only make a difference to individuals, families, and groups, but can effect change at a community and systems level. This is done by considering the many factors that can affect the health of communities and those who live within them. Their roles include advocating for services, providing support, linking and referral to community resources, and advocacy to assist individuals and families in finding safe housing, secure employment and other necessary supports.

Practice Environment
Public health nurses have the unique distinction of practicing in “a setting without walls.” They work in a wide range of settings to meet the needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, populations, and society. Examples include the client’s home, schools, sexual health clinics, immunization clinics, and settings where older
Liability Protection

By 2011, nurses will likely be required to be protected from liability. RNAO members are automatically eligible for protection through Canadian Nurses’ Protective Society (CNPS). xii

Current Status

Public health nurses can be found across Ontario, protecting and promoting health. With increasing fiscal challenges in Ontario health care health promotion, prevention, and protection are the key to a sustainable health care system. A current focus on health human resources in public health has shifted emphasis on increasing capacity of PHNs. Introduction of the PHN competencies and the 4th edition of Public Health ~ Community Health Nursing Practice in Canada have increased focus on the roles and activities of PHNs. New emerging professional development activities for PHNs will strengthen the PHN workforce in Ontario positioning Public health nurses with the knowledge skills and abilities to be leaders in health promotion in Ontario.

Links

Community Health Nurses of Canada
- http://www.chnc.ca/
Community Health Nurses’ Initiatives Group - RNAO
- http://www.chnig.org
Canadian Nurses Association Community Health Certification
- http://www.cna-aiic.ca/CNA/nursing/certification/default_e.a spx

References


iii College of Nurses of Ontario (2008).


vii Ibid, 4. p.3

ix Ibid 4, p.3

x Ibid 1.

xi Ibid 1


xiii Ibid 3

January 2011

Reviewed August 2012