

# Nurses on the Frontlines of Community Health

Throughout its history, public health nursing has challenged social norms and driven reforms to improve community health.

Betty Bekemeier

**B**y the end of the 20th century, public health nurses found their realm of action shifting from earlier broad environmental health and safety concerns to a focus on individual health. With the new century underway, the time is ripe for a widespread return of public health nursing practice to leadership roles in improving health through broader environmental and social action.

## Historical background

The modern public health enterprise in the United States owes much to Lillian Wald, who established public health nursing in the US and practiced in Manhattan's lower east side beginning in the 1890s. She and her nurse colleagues recognized first-hand the limitations of treating illness and offering health education to people who were living in crowded tenements. Wald noted the irony when she wrote, "Impressing upon the poor the latest findings of science without simultaneously urging reform in housing, child protection, and wages is cruelly sardonic on the part of the nurse."

As frustration with unhealthy living conditions grew, the visiting nurses of Wald's Henry Street Settlement concluded that reforming those conditions was the best hope for improving health in their communities. Henry Street Settlement nurses and community activists took on social and environmental reforms related to housing, child labor, unsafe cottage industries, and other factors contributing to poor health. The concept of independent public health nurses addressing the social conditions that affect health spread rapidly to other cities and towns.

As infectious disease rates plummeted, chronic health conditions attracted more practitioner attention and became seen as personal medical problems rather than public health issues. By the end of the 20th century, the public health system had been thoroughly medicalized under the pressures of specialization, fee-for-service direct care, and division of labor. Much of the scope of public health nursing narrowed to affecting the behaviors of individual clients. Efforts to

change the environment—from housing to food safety—moved from public health to other governmental agencies.

The limitations of our medicalized public health system, with its focus on individual behavior, have become clear when we review the lack of progress over recent decades in reducing rates of diabetes, asthma, and obesity, or in creating equitable health status across racial and ethnic lines.

Today's public health challenges require that the public health workforce travel well upstream to have a positive effect on the health of their communities.



Visiting Nurse Service of New York, www.vnsny.org

Today's public health challenges require that the public health workforce travel well upstream to have a positive effect on the health of their communities. As public health practitioners become attuned to the critical interaction of populations with their social, cultural, and physical environments, they are identifying strategies beyond individual solutions and addressing environmental factors to create living conditions that promote health. Nurses make up the single largest professional discipline in the public health workforce today, and the time has come for them to play key roles again in this crucial function of public health practice.

Photo: A public health nurse crosses over tenement roofs to visit families, c. 1908.

## Training for environmental health

Beginning in the 1990s, several efforts got underway to make certain that public health nurses were once again prepared to respond to environmental health challenges. In 1994, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) started these efforts with an initiative to support environmental health knowledge, skills, and awareness among nurses. The initiative encouraged nurses' contributions to promoting environmental health for individuals and communities. It developed educational resources and implemented training programs nationwide, in collaboration with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and the National Institute of Nursing Research.

Soon after this ATSDR initiative took root, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) produced its 1995 report *Nursing, Health, and the Environment*. This report described environmental health nursing competencies that extend nurses' existing roles as investigators, educators, and advocates. Additional competencies included understanding the basic mechanisms of exposure to environmental health hazards, completing environmental exposure histories, making appropriate referrals for conditions with probable environmental



Patricia Butterfield

etiologies, and understanding the principles of environmental justice and risk communication in addressing environmental health issues.

The National Institute of Health's National Institute of Nursing Research followed IOM's lead by endorsing a research focus on reducing hazards for high-risk population groups, assessing for hazards, and determining infrastructure needs for enhancing nurses' ability to investigate environmental health issues.

More recently, in 2005, the Quad Council of Public Health Nursing Organizations developed and endorsed the Environmental Health Principles and Recommendations for Public Health Nursing.

## New Environmental Health Nursing Certificate Program

The University of Washington School of Nursing established a new Advanced Practice Environmental Health Nursing certificate program in fall 2007. This 15-credit, post-master's nursing certificate is available to graduate nursing students and professionals who have finished a master's degree or are in the process of completing one. An array of electives encourages those who pursue this certificate to develop a specialty in an area of their interest, such as policy, toxic substances, or children's environmental health issues. A capstone experience in a community or clinical setting offers the opportunity for mentorship and practical application of coursework. For more information about the program or to apply, see [www.son.washington.edu/eo/apehns-certificate/default.asp](http://www.son.washington.edu/eo/apehns-certificate/default.asp). ■

These principles include statements in support of environmental justice and the precautionary principle, which states that if the consequences of an action are potentially severe or irreversible, the absence of full scientific certainty should not be used to prevent action. The environmental health principles also declare that environmental health is "integral to the role and responsibilities of all public health nurses."

In line with national efforts, schools of nursing around the country, including at the University of Washington, are increasingly adding environmental health content to their core nursing curriculum as well as developing academic opportunities for environmental health nursing specialization. These efforts are intended to better prepare the public health nursing workforce for an evolving practice that understands the effect of the environment on human health and that recognizes nurses as crucial for identifying environmental hazards and generating community-based solutions (*see box for details on the UW's new certificate program*).

National and local efforts to reintegrate environmental health into public health nursing practice are a significant step toward reinvigorating the role of public health nurses in addressing environmental conditions that affect health. Through a renewed emphasis on the environment, public health nurses will be reconnected to the profession's past and prepared to carry on the work of their sisters at the Henry Street Settlement into the future, taking on new environmental challenges in order to protect and promote the health of communities and the individuals who live in them. ■

Photo: Nurses Susan Clark and Patricia Butterfield sample water for bacteria, 2007.

### Author

Betty Bekemeier, PhD, MPH, RN, is a faculty member in the University of Washington School of Nursing.