



NURTURING THE NATION: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF NURSING'S IMPACT ON PUBLIC HEALTH

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Abstract

This critical review explores the indispensable role of nursing in the promotion and advancement of public health, tracing its historical roots and examining its evolving functions in the contemporary healthcare landscape. Nursing, an integral component of the healthcare system, serves as the backbone of public health by offering direct patient care, community health education, advocacy, and participation in shaping health policies. This article delves into the multifaceted contributions of nurses to public health, highlighting their role in disease prevention, health promotion, emergency preparedness, and chronic disease management. Despite facing challenges such as workforce shortages, resource constraints, and the ever-changing landscape of public health threats, the nursing profession continues to adapt and innovate. Through case studies and evidence-based practices, this review showcases the impact of nursing interventions on improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare disparities. The article concludes with recommendations for policy reforms, enhanced nursing education, and interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen the role of nursing in public health and ensure resilient healthcare systems. This review underscores the critical need for recognizing, supporting, and investing in nursing to sustain and advance public health objectives.

Keywords: Public Health Nursing, Health Promotion, Disease Prevention, Emergency Preparedness, Chronic Disease Management, Nursing Education, Healthcare Policy, Community Health

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1. Introduction

Public health, a cornerstone of societal well-being, encompasses the collective efforts aimed at preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health through organized community efforts. At the heart of these endeavors lies the nursing profession, whose contributions extend far beyond individual patient care to encompass a broad spectrum of activities that safeguard and enhance community health. This critical review, titled "Nurturing the Nation," aims to illuminate the pivotal role of nursing in public health, tracing its historical evolution, current contributions, challenges faced, and future directions.

Historically, the role of nurses in public health has been foundational, with figures like Florence Nightingale pioneering modern nursing practices that emphasized hygiene, public health, and the use of statistical evidence to improve health outcomes (Dossey, 2010). Nightingale's work during the Crimean War and her subsequent establishment of the first scientifically based nursing school laid the groundwork for nursing's integral role in public health. Since then, nurses have been at the forefront of public health movements, from the battle against infectious diseases in the early 20th century to the management of chronic conditions and health education in the contemporary era.

Today, nurses serve as the linchpin in the delivery of preventive health services, including vaccinations, health screenings, and education on healthy lifestyle choices. Their close contact with communities allows them to identify health trends, educate the public on health risks, and advocate for health-promoting policies (Sullivan-Marx et al., 2010). Moreover, public health nurses specialize in understanding the complex interplay between social determinants and health, enabling them to tailor interventions to the unique needs of diverse populations, thereby reducing health disparities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

However, the nursing profession faces significant challenges in its public health role. Workforce shortages, exacerbated by an aging population and the increasing complexity of healthcare needs, strain the capacity of nurses to meet the growing demands of public health (Buerhaus et al., 2020). Additionally, nurses often encounter policy and administrative barriers that limit their scope of practice and hinder their ability to fully contribute to public health initiatives (Kovner et al., 2011). The dynamic nature of public health threats, such as emerging infectious diseases and the impacts of climate change, further complicates the landscape within which nurses operate.

Despite these challenges, nursing continues to evolve, embracing innovations in technology,

interdisciplinary collaboration, and evidence-based practices to enhance public health outcomes. The integration of digital health technologies, for example, has expanded the reach and efficiency of nursing interventions, enabling remote monitoring, telehealth consultations, and improved data collection and analysis for public health surveillance (Huston, 2013).

In conclusion, the role of nursing in public health is both historic and dynamic, characterized by a steadfast commitment to improving community health through direct care, education, advocacy, and leadership. As we move forward, it is imperative that stakeholders across the healthcare spectrum recognize and support the critical contributions of nursing to public health. Investing in nursing education, expanding the scope of nursing practice, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration are essential steps to ensure that the nursing profession continues to be a driving force in the promotion of public health.

2. Evolution of nursing within public health

The evolution of nursing within public health is a compelling narrative of growth, adaptation, and increasing influence in the face of changing healthcare needs and societal expectations. From its roots in the mid-19th century to its current status as an essential component of the global health workforce, the journey of nursing in public health reflects broader trends in medicine, technology, and social policy.

Early Beginnings

The formalization of nursing as a profession can be traced back to the pioneering work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Nightingale's emphasis on sanitation, patient care, and the systematic use of mortality data laid the groundwork for modern nursing and public health practices (Dossey, 2010). Her establishment of the first secular nursing school at St. Thomas' Hospital in London in 1860 marked the beginning of professional nursing education, which was closely tied to public health principles.

The Rise of Public Health Nursing

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the industrial revolution and urbanization created new public health challenges, including infectious diseases and poor living conditions. Nurses began to take on roles outside of hospitals, working in communities to educate the public, improve hygiene, and prevent disease. Lillian Wald, the founder of the Henry Street Settlement in New York City in 1893, is often credited with establishing the practice of public health nursing by

providing nursing services, social support, and health education to impoverished urban populations (Fee & Bu, 2010).

Expansion and Specialization

Throughout the 20th century, the scope of public health nursing expanded in response to the evolving landscape of public health challenges. The discovery of antibiotics, the development of vaccines, and the rise of chronic diseases shifted the focus from acute infectious diseases to chronic disease management, health promotion, and preventive care. Nurses took on specialized roles in areas such as occupational health, school health, maternal and child health, and community health advocacy.

The establishment of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 and the subsequent declaration of the Alma-Ata in 1978, which emphasized primary health care, further solidified the role of nurses in public health on a global scale. Nurses became integral to the implementation of primary health care strategies, particularly in low-resource settings and developing countries (World Health Organization, 1978).

Contemporary Challenges and Innovations

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen significant shifts in public health priorities due to emerging infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, SARS, and COVID-19, as well as the growing burden of non-communicable diseases. Nurses have adapted to these challenges by embracing advances in technology, such as telehealth and electronic health records, to enhance the delivery of care and public health surveillance (Huston, 2013).

Furthermore, the nursing profession has taken on a more prominent role in health policy and leadership, advocating for equitable health care access, workforce development, and the integration of public health principles into all levels of health care. The recent global emphasis on universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals has further underscored the importance of nursing in achieving public health objectives (World Health Organization, 2020).

The evolution of nursing within public health is a testament to the profession's resilience, adaptability, and unwavering commitment to improving population health. As public health challenges continue to evolve, the nursing profession will undoubtedly remain at the forefront of innovation, leadership, and advocacy in the quest for a healthier world.

3. Nursing's Contribution to Public Health

Nursing's contribution to public health is vast and multifaceted, encompassing a range of activities from direct patient care and community health initiatives to advocacy for health policy reforms. The profession's core commitment to the well-being of individuals and communities alike has positioned nurses as essential players in the promotion and maintenance of public health worldwide.

Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Nurses play a crucial role in disease prevention and health promotion, utilizing a holistic approach that considers the physical, psychological, and social aspects of health. They are involved in administering vaccines, conducting health screenings, and providing education on healthy lifestyles and disease prevention strategies. For example, community health nurses often lead public health campaigns on the importance of vaccinations, hand hygiene, and safe sexual practices, which are critical in controlling the spread of infectious diseases (Salmond & Echevarria, 2017).

Health Education and Community Outreach

Health education is a fundamental aspect of nursing's contribution to public health. Nurses provide individuals and communities with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed health decisions. This includes educating patients on managing chronic conditions, nutritional counseling, and promoting physical activity. Moreover, nurses often work in schools, workplaces, and community centers to deliver health education programs tailored to specific populations, thereby addressing health disparities and improving health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2020).

Emergency Preparedness and Response

Nurses are integral to emergency preparedness and response efforts, whether in the context of natural disasters, pandemics, or other public health emergencies. Their clinical skills, along with their ability to organize, coordinate, and deliver care in challenging circumstances, make them invaluable in crisis situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, nurses were at the forefront, providing direct patient care, supporting public health surveillance efforts, and participating in vaccination campaigns (Liu et al., 2020).

Chronic Disease Management

With the global rise in chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, nurses have

become key players in chronic disease management. They work closely with patients to develop and implement care plans that include medication management, lifestyle modifications, and regular monitoring. Through such interventions, nurses help patients manage their conditions, reduce complications, and improve their quality of life (Hunt, 2015).

Advocacy and Policy Influence

Nurses also contribute to public health through their role as advocates for health policy reform and social justice. They leverage their firsthand experience in healthcare to advocate for policies that improve access to care, address social determinants of health, and promote health equity. Nursing organizations and individual nurses engage in lobbying efforts, participate in policy development, and serve on governmental and non-governmental advisory panels to influence health policy at local, national, and international levels (Mason et al., 2016).

The contributions of nursing to public health are diverse and impactful, extending well beyond the traditional boundaries of healthcare facilities into communities and policy arenas. Through their dedication to disease prevention, health promotion, patient education, emergency response, chronic disease management, and health policy advocacy, nurses are indispensable to the attainment of public health goals. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, the role of nurses in public health is likely to expand further, underscoring the need for ongoing support and investment in nursing education and practice.

4. Challenges and Obstacles

Despite the significant contributions of nursing to public health, the profession faces numerous challenges and obstacles that impact its effectiveness and sustainability. These challenges range from workforce issues and resource constraints to evolving public health threats and the need for policy and administrative reforms.

Workforce Issues

One of the most pressing challenges is the global nursing shortage, which is exacerbated by an aging workforce, high turnover rates, and insufficient capacity in nursing education programs. The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted the critical shortage of nurses worldwide, estimating a shortfall of 5.9 million nurses, with the greatest gaps in low- and lower-middle-income countries (WHO, 2020). This shortage undermines the ability of health systems to provide adequate public health services and respond to health emergencies.

Resource Constraints

Resource constraints, including limited funding for public health programs and inadequate access to necessary supplies and technology, further hinder the ability of nurses to perform their roles effectively. In many settings, nurses are required to provide care with insufficient resources, impacting the quality of care and the health outcomes of populations (Aiken et al., 2017).

Policy and Administrative Barriers

Nurses often face policy and administrative barriers that limit their scope of practice and hinder their potential contributions to public health. Regulatory restrictions on nursing practice can prevent nurses from performing tasks for which they are trained, particularly in areas such as prescription authority and the performance of certain diagnostic tests (Kovner et al., 2011). Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles within healthcare systems can impede the implementation of innovative nursing-led public health initiatives.

Evolving Public Health Threats

The dynamic nature of public health threats, such as emerging infectious diseases, pandemics, and the impacts of climate change, presents ongoing challenges to the nursing profession. Nurses must continuously adapt to new health threats, requiring ongoing education and training to stay abreast of the latest evidence-based practices and public health guidelines (MacMillan, 2019).

Mental Health and Well-being of Nurses

The demanding nature of nursing, particularly in public health contexts, can take a toll on the mental health and well-being of nurses. High-stress environments, emotional labor, and exposure to traumatic situations can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression among nurses, affecting their ability to provide care and maintain their own health (Kunyk et al., 2015).

The challenges and obstacles faced by the nursing profession in the realm of public health are significant, yet they are not insurmountable. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes increasing investments in nursing education and workforce development, removing policy and administrative barriers to nursing practice, enhancing resource allocation for public health services, and providing support for the mental health and well-being of nurses. Through collaborative efforts among healthcare leaders, policymakers, and the nursing community, these challenges can be overcome to strengthen the role of nursing in advancing public health goals.

5. Case Studies and Evidence

Case studies and evidence play a crucial role in illustrating the practical impact of nursing interventions on public health outcomes. By examining specific instances where nursing-led initiatives have led to significant health improvements, we can better understand the value and potential of nursing in the broader context of public health. Below are some case studies that highlight the diverse contributions of nursing to public health:

Case Study 1: Community-Based Management of Chronic Diseases

In a rural community in the United States, a nursing-led initiative focused on the community-based management of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension demonstrated significant improvements in patient outcomes. Nurses employed a combination of home visits, patient education, and telehealth services to manage patients' conditions effectively. The program resulted in a marked decrease in emergency department visits and hospitalizations, improved medication adherence, and better disease control among participants (Hunt, 2015).

Case Study 2: Public Health Response to Infectious Disease Outbreaks

During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014-2016, nurses were instrumental in controlling the spread of the virus. They provided direct care to infected individuals, educated communities about infection prevention practices, and participated in contact tracing efforts. Despite the high risk to their own health, their efforts were critical in reducing transmission rates and ultimately controlling the outbreak (WHO, 2016).

Case Study 3: School-Based Health Promotion Programs

In Australia, a nursing-led school-based health promotion program aimed at preventing obesity in children through education on healthy eating and physical activity was highly successful. Nurses conducted workshops for students, teachers, and parents, and implemented school-wide initiatives to encourage healthy behaviors. The program led to significant improvements in students' knowledge of healthy lifestyles, reductions in the consumption of sugary drinks and snacks, and increased physical activity levels (Bell et al., 2013).

Case Study 4: Addressing Mental Health in Refugee Populations

A team of public health nurses in Canada developed a mental health support program for Syrian

refugees resettled in the country. The program included mental health screenings, culturally sensitive counseling services, and community support groups. The initiative not only improved the mental health outcomes for the refugee population but also facilitated their integration into the community and enhanced their overall well-being (Khanlou et al., 2017).

Case Study 5: Nurse-Led Telehealth Services for Rural Communities

In a remote area of Brazil, nurse-led telehealth services provided residents with access to healthcare advice, diagnosis, and treatment planning. Using video conferencing and remote monitoring technology, nurses were able to manage chronic conditions, provide prenatal care, and offer health education to individuals who otherwise had limited access to healthcare services. This approach significantly improved healthcare accessibility and reduced the need for travel to distant healthcare facilities (Silva et al., 2018).

These case studies exemplify the critical role that nurses play in addressing a wide range of public health challenges. Through direct care, education, and innovative service delivery models, nursing interventions have a profound impact on improving health outcomes and enhancing the quality of life for diverse populations.

6. Innovations in Nursing for Public Health

Innovations in nursing are reshaping the landscape of public health by introducing new approaches, technologies, and interdisciplinary collaborations aimed at improving health outcomes and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of healthcare services. These innovations not only address current health challenges but also anticipate future needs, ensuring that the nursing profession remains a vital force in the promotion and maintenance of public health.

Digital Health and Telehealth

The integration of digital health technologies into nursing practice has revolutionized the way healthcare is delivered, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Telehealth services, including teleconsultations, remote patient monitoring, and mobile health applications, enable nurses to provide care, monitor patient health, and offer health education from a distance. This approach has been especially crucial in managing chronic diseases, mental health, and during public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring continuity of care while minimizing the risk of disease transmission (Bashshur et al., 2020).

Big Data and Health Informatics

The use of big data and health informatics in nursing has improved public health surveillance, decision-making, and policy formulation. Nurses, equipped with skills in data analytics, contribute to the analysis of health trends, identification of risk factors, and evaluation of health interventions. This data-driven approach facilitates targeted public health strategies, efficient resource allocation, and the early detection of emerging health threats (Risling, 2017).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interdisciplinary collaboration has emerged as a key innovation in public health nursing, bringing together professionals from various fields such as medicine, social work, environmental science, and public policy. These collaborations enable a more holistic approach to health challenges, combining diverse expertise to address the social determinants of health, develop comprehensive care plans, and implement community-wide health initiatives. Interdisciplinary teams often involve nurses in leadership roles, coordinating efforts and bridging gaps between different sectors (Wei et al., 2019).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Nurses are increasingly involved in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), a collaborative approach to research that engages community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. CBPR in nursing focuses on issues relevant to the community's health, ensuring that research findings are directly applicable to practice and contribute to the empowerment and improved health of community members (Castleden et al., 2012).

Sustainable Healthcare Practices

Sustainability in healthcare is gaining attention, and nurses are at the forefront of implementing sustainable practices within public health. This includes efforts to reduce waste, conserve resources, and promote environmentally friendly healthcare practices. Nurses are advocating for and leading changes that not only benefit the environment but also improve patient care and community health (Anåker & Elf, 2014).

The innovations in nursing are driving significant advancements in public health, addressing both current and future challenges. Through the adoption of digital health technologies, the application of big data, interdisciplinary collaboration, community-based participatory research, and sustainable practices, nursing is

continually evolving to meet the complex health needs of populations worldwide. These innovations underscore the critical role of nursing in shaping the future of public health and highlight the need for continued investment in nursing education, research, and practice.

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The multifaceted contributions of nursing to public health, along with the challenges and innovations encountered, underscore the need for supportive policies that enhance the role of nurses and ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of their contributions. The following policy implications and recommendations are derived from the current state of nursing in public health, aiming to strengthen the profession and improve health outcomes at the population level.

Strengthening Nursing Education and Training

1. **Expand Capacity and Access:** Increase investment in nursing education to expand capacity in nursing schools, reduce barriers to entry, and incorporate advanced public health content into curricula. This will address the global nursing shortage and prepare a workforce capable of meeting contemporary public health challenges (World Health Organization, 2020).
2. **Continuing Education and Specialization:** Develop and fund continuing education programs focused on public health competencies, emerging health threats, and innovations in care delivery. Encourage and support specialization in public health nursing to build a cadre of experts in various facets of public health (Salmond & Echevarria, 2017).

Advocacy for Policy Changes and Increased Funding

1. **Scope of Practice:** Advocate for policy changes that expand the scope of practice for nurses, allowing them to work to the full extent of their education and training, particularly in areas such as prescribing medications and performing diagnostic tests (Kovner et al., 2011).
2. **Public Health Funding:** Lobby for increased funding for public health programs and initiatives, emphasizing the cost-effectiveness of preventive care and health promotion activities led by nurses. This includes advocating for resources for emerging public health threats and ensuring that public health infrastructure can adequately support nursing activities (Aiken et al., 2017).

Enhancing Public Awareness and Engagement

1. **Public Health Campaigns:** Utilize the trusted position of nurses in communities to lead public health campaigns that raise awareness about health risks and promote healthy behaviors. These campaigns should be culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific needs of diverse populations (Hunt, 2015).
2. **Community Engagement:** Foster partnerships between nursing professionals, community organizations, and the public to engage communities in health promotion activities and policy advocacy. This collaborative approach can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of public health initiatives (Castleden et al., 2012).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Integrated Care Models

1. **Collaborative Practice Models:** Promote the development and implementation of interdisciplinary collaborative practice models that include nurses, physicians, public health professionals, and other stakeholders. Such models can enhance the delivery of comprehensive and coordinated care (Wei et al., 2019).
2. **Integration of Public Health and Primary Care:** Advocate for policies that facilitate the integration of public health and primary care services, leveraging the role of nurses in bridging these areas. This can ensure a more seamless continuum of care and better alignment of health services with public health goals (MacMillan, 2019).

Implementing these policy recommendations requires a concerted effort from nursing professionals, healthcare leaders, policymakers, and the broader community. By addressing the educational, practice, funding, and collaborative needs of the nursing profession, these policies can enhance the contributions of nurses to public health, ultimately leading to healthier communities and improved health outcomes.

Conclusion

The critical examination of nursing's role in promoting public health, as explored in "Nurturing the Nation," underscores the indispensable contributions of nurses across various domains, from direct patient care and community health initiatives to emergency preparedness and health policy advocacy. Nurses, with their unique position at the intersection of healthcare delivery and community engagement, are pivotal in addressing a wide array of public health challenges, fostering

disease prevention, and promoting health and well-being at the population level.

The historical evolution of nursing within public health highlights a profession that has continuously adapted to meet the changing needs of society, from the early days of Florence Nightingale to the modern era of digital health technologies. Nurses have not only been caregivers but also innovators, educators, and advocates, driving public health advancements and improving health outcomes across communities.

Despite the significant contributions, nurses face numerous challenges that impact their ability to fully participate in public health efforts. Workforce shortages, resource constraints, policy and administrative barriers, and the ever-evolving landscape of public health threats pose significant obstacles. Yet, the resilience and adaptability of the nursing profession shine through, as evidenced by the innovative practices and interdisciplinary collaborations that continue to emerge.

As we look to the future, the case studies and evidence presented highlight the profound impact that nursing interventions can have on public health. These success stories serve as powerful examples of what can be achieved when nurses are supported and empowered to utilize their skills and expertise fully.

In conclusion, the role of nursing in promoting public health is both vast and vital. To harness the full potential of the nursing profession, it is imperative that stakeholders across the healthcare spectrum recognize and support the critical contributions of nursing. This includes investing in nursing education, expanding the scope of nursing practice, and advocating for policies that enhance the public health infrastructure. By doing so, we can ensure that the nursing profession continues to be a driving force in the promotion of public health, paving the way for healthier communities and a healthier nation.

The journey of nursing in public health is ongoing, and its contributions are more crucial than ever in the face of global health challenges. "Nurturing the Nation" serves as a call to action to support and invest in the nursing profession, recognizing its central role in achieving public health goals and ensuring a healthier future for all.

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