Exploring Public Health Nursing at the Community and Systems Level

One of the hallmarks of a baccalaureate nursing education is the inclusion of public health nursing curriculum and clinical experiences. In the past few decades, public health nursing has changed dramatically in terms of shifting focus from individuals to population-based health care (Nies & McEwen, 2011). As a result, public health nursing faculty are seeking opportunities to engage students in learning about the roles of public health nurses in population-based care at not only the individual level, but also community and systems level of nursing practice.

Public Health Nursing Day

Using the Minnesota Public Health Intervention Wheel (Keller, Strohschein, Lia-Hoagberg, & Schaffer, 1998) as a framework, a public health nursing day at the state health department was designed to expose students to the diverse roles in public health with a public health laboratory tour, nurse panel, and reflection. The Minnesota Public Health Intervention Wheel is a framework describing 17 public health interventions that nurses perform ranging from surveillance and screening to policy development. The interventions are divided into three levels: individual and family, community, and systems level to designate what level the intervention is being applied at in a public health situation (Olson Keller & Strohschein, 2011). When learning about the Intervention Wheel, students often struggle in understanding and applying the community and systems level interventions as much of what they initially encounter through clinical experiences is at the individual and family level. This activity was designed to expose students to the community and systems level of interventions within public health at the state health department.

The planning for the day began by contacting the state public health laboratory to arrange for a tour of the various departments within the laboratory. The tour lasted 1.5 hours and included the following laboratories: newborn screening, environmental health, and infectious disease. Students heard from staff in these areas about public health surveillance, monitoring, and disease investigation (all components of the Intervention Wheel) and were able to hear how these interventions were being applied at the community and systems levels. Faculty accompanying the students on the tours challenged the students to describe the role of the laboratory in their future work as nurses; for example, in the newborn screening laboratory, faculty discussed the importance of properly collecting a blood specimen and responding to abnormal results.

“Speed-Dating” Panel Session

At the conclusion of the tour, the students joined six to 10 public health nursing professionals from the state health department for a “speed-dating” panel session related to the nursing professionals’ paths and roles in public health at the state level. Panelists from a variety of areas including maternal and child health, infectious disease, and environmental health were recruited. Panelists were identified through a review of the state health department Web site to locate contact information for nurse specialists and nurse leaders in various divisions. In addition, several alumni from the nursing program who worked in the state health department were contacted to participate.

The panel session lasted for 2 hours and included a brief welcome and introduction of the panelists. Panelists and students then were divided into small groups of three to four in pods throughout the room. Every 6 to 8 minutes, the students rotated from table to table. Students prepared questions in advance related to the panelists’ roles. The panelists were able to describe their work at the community and systems level with interventions such as policy development and enforcement, coalition building, collaboration, and delegated functions.

Student Feedback

A reflection activity was conducted at the end of the day for the students to relate the roles of the public health professionals to specific interventions on the Minnesota Public Health Intervention Wheel. Students also were asked in their course evaluations to specifically comment on the value of the state public health tour and panel session. Summaries of the students’ feedback included:

- Amazed at the variety of paths the nurses took to be in their roles today.
- Expressed greater understanding and application of public health nursing interventions at the community and systems level.
- Impressed with the technology and prestige of the state public health laboratory.
- Encouraged by all the opportunities available within nursing, especially public health nursing.

The most recent group of students who participated in the tour were asked to rate the experience using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = poor and 5 = outstanding). All of the students (n = 24) rated the experience as 3 or higher, with 71% rating the experience as 4 or higher. The state health department public health laboratory tour and panel session proved to be an extremely valuable experience for students, highlighting the roles for public health nurses at a community- and systems-level of practice.

References


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