

Occupational Health Nurse: An overview

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent years occupational health branch of Preventive and Social Medicine is gaining importance and promotion of worker's health has become a necessity for various reasons:

- a) The social value of work and the principle that it should not impair the worker's health and welfare are generally recognized by public authorities and find wide acceptance in the quarters concerned, employers and workers¹.
- b) Managements of undertakings are increasingly conscious of the positive effect that a satisfactory level of health among the workers can have on productivity, absenteeism and turnover¹.
- c) The workers are becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of health and hygiene as factors of social advancements¹.

This development has led to proliferation of occupational health services particularly in developed nations as compared to developing countries where basic infrastructure for providing occupational health services are lacking beside shortage of trained occupational health physicians and Nurses.

Even in developed countries not all industries can afford to have complete occupational health team comprising of occupational health physician and male and female occupational Nurses. The size and scope of occupational health services may depend on several factors such as the size of the industry, the number of work units, the number of workers employed in each units, the health risk involved, the nature of the work

undertaken or services provided, the geographical location of the workplaces and the public and other services available. The main objective of this review is to highlight the education, status, duties and responsibilities of an occupational health Nurse.

DEFINITION OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTHNURSING

According to American Association of Industrial Nurses², occupational health Nursing is defined as "the application of Nursing principles in conserving the health of workers in all occupations. It involves prevention, recognition and treatment of illness and injury and requires special skills and knowledge in the fields of health education and counselling, environmental health and rehabilitation."

The occupational health Nurse applies the art and science of Nursing for the purpose of conserving, promoting and restoring the health of individuals at and through their places of employment. The occupational health Nurse is a professional who works both independently and cooperatively as a member of an occupational health team.

There are three factors that influence what the Nurse does and thus influence her effectiveness as a member of the occupational health team²⁻⁴.

- i) the image that society has of the role of the Nurse and of her contribution to the delivery of health and medical care.
- ii) what the medical community sees as the Nurse's role, and
- iii) how Nurses view their place in, and their contribution to the health and medical care system.

THE EDUCATION OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTHNURSE

The professional Nurse and the auxiliary Nurse can practice occupational health Nursing provided they should have undertaken a special

course of study designed to meet the requirements of the work of the occupational health^{1,2}. Subjects, which might be studied, include industrial law, social law and administration, industrial psychology, industrial safety and hygiene, record keeping, health education and the administration and organization of a health unit. Such study should be supported by practice in the working situation, preferably under the guidance of a trained occupational health Nurse.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSE POSITIONS:

Occupational health Nurse can occupy following positions depending upon her experience²:

a) **Occupational health Staff Nurse:** She is registered Nurse who is employed to work as a Nurse in an established occupational health service. She performs her professional duties under Nursing supervision, working closely with physicians and other members of the occupational health team.

b) **Occupational Health Nursing Supervisor:** She is a registered Nurse with special preparation and experience. She has one or more Nurses under her direction. She is authorised to assume responsibility for planning and administering the Nursing service within an occupational health program. Her job responsibilities require that she functions at a management level within the occupational health service formulating policy, selecting, orienting and appraising staff.

c) **Occupational health Nurse specialist:** She also is a registered Nurse with special preparation and experience. She functions independently and carries the responsibility for the administration of the occupational health program. She often coordinates the medical environmental aspects of the occupational health program, working cooperatively with the



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physician, the industrial hygienist and the qualified safety professional when their expertise is required.

THE DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSE

In addition to her basic responsibilities of promoting health, alleviating sufferings and conserving life, the occupational health Nurse requires additional knowledge and skills to make the maximum contribution to the health of the worker such as ^{1,2,5,6}:

- a) a knowledge of approved occupational health Nursing principles and policies;
- b) to be aware of the effect of work and the working environment on the health of worker;
- c) sound clinical judgment to recognize the potential serious risk to health in the apparently trivial signs and symptoms;
- d) a working knowledge of the laws of the country relating to health, welfare and safety of persons at work;
- e) an awareness of physical and toxicological risks to health, preventive measures required to safeguard health, and appropriate first-aid measures to be taken in the event of an accident;
- f) the value of maintaining good inter-personnel relationship such as with other members of occupational health team viz. occupational health physician, industrial hygienist and safety professional;
- g) skill in methods of communication;
- h) the art and practice of interviewing and teaching methods;

i) Other responsibilities:

- 1) Responsibilities within the health unit – She is responsible for daily administration of the health centre such as, arranging for the work schedule, organising any special clinics required e.g. immunization clinics, hearing conservation programme, etc.
- 2) The emergency treatment of injuries arising from and during the course of employment – The Nurse must ascertain

whether medical guidance or hospital treatment is required, must provide appropriate care and rehabilitation and at the time of the incident involving serious injuries the Nurse should notify management immediately so that measures can be taken to make the workplace safe and the requirements laid down by law, in relation to accidents and compensation, can be fulfilled.

3) The treatment of emergency illness occurring during working hours such as cerebral haemorrhage, myocardial infarction, acute abdomen, etc.

4) The treatment of injuries and illnesses occurring outside working hours.

5) Participation in immunization programmes.

6) Participation in medical examination – The Nurse should assist the company physician with the pre-employment and routine medical examination of workers by ascertaining and recording the work history and medical history, height and weight, assessment of visual acuity, etc.

7) Health education – Nurse should advise workers on any health problems detected, how to overcome such problems and the appropriate agencies available.

8) To maintain records – The maintenance of records is a very important duty undertaken by the Nurse and such records must be legible, accurate, factual, concise, and complete.

MAJOR SERVICES OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSE BY SUBJECT ⁷

Subject & Types of services

Individual

- health counselling
- referring to laboratory or screening test.
- explaining medical examination results to workers.
- reporting workers suspicious of occupational diseases to the regional office.
- referring workers exposed to hazardous material for secondary examination.
- assessment of health status of workers injured by industrial accidents.

Group

- performing group health education

Workplace

- guidance for desirable life style such as no smoking and abstinence from drinking.
- guidance for prevention of chronic degenerative diseases.
- guidance for balanced diet and nutrition.
- hygienic management of general environment in workplaces.
- guidance for maintenance and management of first aid kits in workplaces.
- guiding persons in charge of health care in workplaces for their roles and affairs.
- filling out management records in workplaces.
- reporting on the results of visits to workplaces.
- planning for annual health management affairs in workplaces.
- evaluation of annual health management affairs in workplaces.
- providing information on health care and advice on laws related to industrial health care.

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