

# The Role of Nurses in Family Planning

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Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1835), an English clergyman wrote an essay in 1798 pointing out that population increases faster than the means of subsistence and advocated that population growth should be controlled, mainly by moral restraint. Today, the triad of population, pollution and poverty is rampant in many parts of the world. The scientists calculate that at the present rate of growth, population of India may cross a billion mark by the turn of the century. It is a national problem, and national policies and programmes are being formulated and executed at the national level. Population control, in a democratic society is however a matter of decision for the individual couples. The community must help the couples in coming to the proper decision and also help them implement it. The voluntary organisations can play an important role as social leaders in this context. The nursing profession is in even more favourable position to do so. The nursing profession is by and large a profession of women, and women have been pioneers of family planning movement all over the world. To name a few of the many, Margaret Langer and Hannah Stone of U.S.A., Helena Wright of U.K., Mrs. Ottensen-Jensen of Sweden, Lady Rama Rau of India, have been the leading torch-bearers from the early days of the movement.

Margaret Sanger who has been acclaimed as the founder of family planning movement was a nurse. She had been a stormy petrel all her life. After graduating, mar-

rying and having borne three children, she started work as a visiting nurse in New York's east side. In course of her job as a nurse, she saw poverty and plethora of children go hand in hand. Illegal and dangerous abortions were the only way, the women could adopt to avoid getting unwanted children. In 1912, a poor Jewish woman, mother of four died in her arms after having undergone an illegal abortion, and she took a decision to democratise and socialize contraception so that it would be available to the masses. The subsequent story of her career is a saga of indomitable and fearless spirit and courage of conviction. On October 16, 1916, Margaret Sanger, her sister Ethel Byrne and a social worker, Fania Mindell opened the first birth control clinic in U.S.A., and were promptly arrested; Margaret Sanger was jailed for the first of eight times.

India has been in the forefront of family planning movement from the early days. The first official birth control clinic anywhere in the world was opened by Government of Mysore in June, 1930. Earlier in 1923, Professor Karve, a professor of Mathematics opened a clinic at Poona. He was soon deprived of his job for his association with the birth control movement.

The National Planning Committee formed by the Indian National Congress under the Chairmanship of Pandit Nehru had taken note of the problem and stated, "In the interest of social economy, family happiness and national planning, family planning and limitation of children are essential and State should adopt a policy to

encourage these. It is desirable to lay stress on self control as well as to spread knowledge of cheap and safe methods of birth control." The lead of India was again established when in 1952, the first official family planning programme was launched.

The problem of population explosion is multifaceted. It is intricately linked with socio-economic development, food, housing, education, employment, social amenities etc. But the only means of controlling population rationally is by prevention of unwanted birth. The pleasure of sex is shared by both the sexes, but the toils of conception are only of the women.

Today, however, women are no longer agreeable to accept child-bearing as their main biological function. Even in a traditional society, women are more amenable to suggestions of birth control than men and for obvious reasons. The receptivity to ideas on family planning is maximum in the post-partum period. The nursing profession is in an unique position to help the women, specially so during this period. Further, women will obviously be more amenable to suggestion emanating from members of their own sex, and feel free to get doubts clarified.

The lead from the nursing profession should come out of conviction that family planning methods are desirable, not only from the community point of view but also for the health and happiness of individual families, and especially for women and children. As working women, the precepts are even more applicable to them, and they can therefore influence their patients both by example and advice.

The year 1974 is being observed as World Population Year, but efforts cannot be called worthwhile if it ceases with the celebrations. To be meaningful, it will have to be sustained till family planning methods have become established as traditional society customs.

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