



Health Education and Public Health Nursing

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"**H**EALTH is wealth" is the saying. It is a very common phrase which we would have heard in our lifetime at one point or another. Health is not merely the absence of disease but it is the presence of mental, physical and social well being: so to obtain this health, "health education" is used as a tool by all the health workers.

What is health education then? Health education is not a device to stop people doing what they want to, nor is it something that encourages bad habits such as excessive smoking, over-eating, alcoholism, etc. It is not merely a health propaganda or instruction. Health Education aims at enabling the learner to make his own choices and decisions about health matters. It provides experiences for the individual learner to develop an insight and understanding of health matters which will eventually facilitate the community as a whole to take better action in the improvement of health. Health education guides people away from prejudices and superstitions and helps them towards acceptance and understanding of scientific truth concerning health practices.

Now that we have defined health education let us consider the link between health education and Public Health Nursing and to see whether the Public Health Nurse is a health educator or not. It is needless to say that she is a health educator. Since Public Health Nurse is the key person of the health team, she has immense responsibility for promotion of health in the community. As we know public health nursing includes visiting the people in their homes, care of expectant and nursing mothers,

care of young children, treatment of minor ailments, training and supervision of *dais*, promoting family planning work, covering school health services, keeping of records and helping in research etc. Unless she incorporates health education in all of the above mentioned services, her public health nursing practice will not be effective. She has a greater task to educate the community towards more and more healthful living because she is the one who comes in contact with the people more closely than any other member of the health team.

The Public Health Nurse has to utilise the opportunity to give the right information to the right person at the right time in order to be an effective health educator. To impart sound health education she needs to bear in mind certain things:

Firstly that health education is closely linked with a variety of social, economic and religious beliefs which directly or indirectly affect the health status of the people. Such beliefs and practices may be the starting points for health education which the Public Health Nurse should be aware of. She, as an effective health educator, should have good knowledge of (a) the people with whom she plans to work and to accept them fully, (b) their culture (c) their habits and customs (d) beliefs, traditions and taboos etc. with respect to health and illness and (e) social and economic conditions. How are these things going to help her to be successful?

For example, if the people believe in magical practices and indigenous practitioners, perhaps

the best approach for Public Health Nurse is to somehow work with those people. We are aware of the fact that in our country specially in rural areas we have untrained *dais* (usually known as Barber women) who practise midwifery. Here is an opportunity for the Public Health Nurse to work closely with such practitioners, educate and train them with explanations based on modern science. The barber women have their own theories about pregnancy and child birth. The Public Health Nurse can turn out to be an effective worker with these *dais* if she does not condemn their existing customs, practices or beliefs which do not harm, but tries to modify so that these women are helpful; and then the health education she offers can be accepted with good results. Once this is done the Public Health Nurse can also make use of such people as media to spread proper health education.

Secondly, she should keep in touch with all phases of the community development. For example, she needs to have knowledge of the plans and progress made in every aspect of health work such as safe water, safe disposal of sewage, nutrition, malaria control, T.B. work, maternal and child care etc. since all these are inter-related. The Public Health Nurse who works in the community more closely has a greater and important task to perform towards betterment of diet habits, sanitation and other aspects of health, because all these have a bearing on the illness. As a health educator she has to consider what needs to be done, what has been done, what the people would like, how it is to

be done, the financial resources and facilities etc. available. The interests, needs and aspiration of the people themselves provide starting points and motivating forces for establishing their goodwill and participation.

It is obvious from the above mentioned points that the Public Health Nurse has tremendous responsibility as an educator. An important aspect to consider is how the Public Health Nurse can make the health education meaningful and useful to the people. She needs to develop the skills in the use of educational methods and media for effective teaching. To carry this out, the Public Health Nurse needs to follow certain principles in the selection and use of the methods and media of health education. The commonest methods used are (a) Individual Interviews (b) Talks, Lectures, Panel Discussions and (c) Group Discussion.

The three methods mentioned can be rendered effective by the use of audio-visual aids such as flashcards, demonstration models, pictures—either still or movie, dramas—specially role playing, exhibits etc. Pictures used should be self-explanatory.

At this point it might be relevant to mention about the programme carried out by the Public Health Nurse in our agency. A great amount of emphasis is placed in health teaching by the Public Health Nurses while rendering both curative and preventive services. The Public Health Nurse who is

responsible for every activity in her own sub-centre area takes initiative in planning, organising and carrying out health talks in various clinics such as Maternal and Child Welfare, Leprosy, Tuberculosis, Outpatient etc., along with their routine Home Visiting Programme. The materials that are frequently used on such occasions are flash cards, flannel graphs, demonstrations, occasionally film strips and movies. Pamphlets are issued at the time of epidemics and mass health campaigns are also conducted.

Health Education and Public Health Nursing are inseparable. They go hand in hand. We have seen briefly the responsibility of the Public Health Nurse in promoting health education. The road she has to take is not an easy one and she needs to surmount several obstacles before she reaches her goal.

Before concluding I would like to mention and remind ourselves of another important fact. Often there arises an attitude among various health workers that "mother and baby care" is the work of a Public Health Nurse or a Health Visitor only, and in other instances the Public Health Nurse may also feel that environmental sanitation is not her business. But this is not so. Any worker who feels this way is missing great opportunities to be more effective. Every sphere in health work is inter-related and inter-dependent. Health of the mother and baby is dependent on the water supply and on the control of diseases that are

spread by human faeces, flies and other such vectors. This point should not be forgotten by us. Every health worker needs to be health education conscious. Above all, greater responsibility falls in the hands of the Public Health Nurse since she is the one who is closely associated with the people and serves as the captain of the team. So she serves as a link between the official health and education authorities, and the leaders of the local areas and influence them to co-operate in the health programme. Health education is a continuous and ever growing aspect in the field of Public Health. Therefore the Public Health Nurse occupies an important place in health team as a torch bearer holding on the health education as the light and thus helping people to be away from the darkness, ignorance, superstition, prejudices etc. and guiding them to live more healthfully. So don't you think it is a challenge to all of us both as Public Health Nurses and nurses in other fields to impart health education wherever we may be in the field of Public Health or in hospitals for the improvement of the health of the citizens of our mother land?

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