

The Public Health Nurse in the Community

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THE concept of nursing is changing very rapidly from "bed-side" nursing to "community-side" nursing. During the empirical health era up to 1850 A.D., medical science was only *symptom*-centered. With the discovery of causative organisms of disease, it developed into a basic science, which was *disease*-centered. During the early part of twentieth century, medical science became *patient*-centered, which included the diagnosis and treatment of the total individual—his physical, mental and social well-being. With the development of Social and Preventive Medicine, Medical Science has now become *community*-centered, which includes the diagnosis and treatment of the *total community*.

The nursing profession has also undergone a corresponding evolution and has developed into a full-fledged "public health-minded profession". A public health nurse has a great role to play in modern community medicine. She has to plan, instigate, stimulate and co-ordinate the various public health programmes in action in the community.

During her training, she is equipped with the knowledge and technique of studying the community and its health status. She knows how to assess public health problems, the needs and wants of a community, and is trained to make a community diagnosis.

In any service to the community, I am convinced that we have to get a lot deeper than most of us do working with people. We have to get down where we find out what people want and why they want it and build on that rather than on something we have in our

minds to put across. Because we believe that the human being is constantly reacting to his environment, both consciously and unconsciously, we know that he is influenced favourably or otherwise by everything that happens to him.

A public health nurse must know the correct approach to a community. She must study the ethnological characteristics of the community and its demography before launching any public health programme. It will be unwise, for instance, to take up family planning activities in that segment of the population, where birth rate is normally low, or to introduce Maternity and Child Welfare Centres in Pensioners' Settlements.

The public health nurse must create an awareness of the need in the community for any public health programme. She may, for instance, feel that diphtheria immunization is necessary in the community. But she will fail to get the desired response from the community, unless the community is made aware of its *need* and this need is converted into *want*. Once the community is involved to sponsor our public health programmes, we need not go to it as external agents, but will always be welcomed to carry out the programme. A very interesting experience can be quoted here of a "cleaning campaign" recently conducted by the Health Department with the help of Social Workers and Councillors; the plan was to clean dwelling houses in order to inculcate a better sense of sanitation, and to emphasise the *dignity of labour*, among *chawl* dwellers. The object of this campaign was that the residents would emulate the demons-

tration of self-help and keep their surroundings clean. But No! The residents instead expected the Health Department to visit their localities again to repeat the campaign of cleaning periodically. This failure was due to an incorrect approach to the community by not involving it from the outset in the programme.

While working with the families, the public health nurse must apply her scientific knowledge in a practical manner. If, for instance, she preaches to the families that "An apple a day keeps the doctor away", it will soon be revealed to her by the families that the apple is so expensive and beyond their means that it would be better to have "A doctor a day to keep the apple away"! Any education, any teaching, any advice must be feasible and acceptable.

A public health nurse may usually find it easy to work in a community through community organisations, and through community leaders. In this way she can act as a liaison between the community and official organization.

The public health nurse is going to be a great asset in accelerating the improvement of health status of India in the near future, and to that extent, our national planners should appreciate the need for upgrading the social status of this profession in India.