

The Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse

By

K. Thomas R.N., P.H.N.

During these days of planning for better Health Services for our people through the Community Development Scheme, people are awakening to the value of the Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse more and more in the preventive and curative services. Since the ratio of qualified Public Health Nurses to the Health Visitors is low and the nature of work carried on at present is similar to both, the Health Visitor is better known to the public than the Public Health Nurse. The Public Health Nurse is the more adequately prepared person to cater for the total health needs of the people at all stages in life.

The Health Visitor may be defined as a technically trained person employed either by government or non-governmental agencies for the purpose of visiting and caring for people in their own homes, advising expectant and nursing mothers in care of the young, prevention of communicable diseases and health education in general.

All these services are essential in the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting physical and mental well being through organised community efforts. Organized at a State level, such services have become an integral part of all public health programmes. As a member of the Health team the Health Visitor is a key person through whom these services radiate to reach the individual and family from cradle to grave. In a country like India with its vast population, inadequate facilities and personnel the services of the Health Visitors are essential. With the integration of Public Health into the Basic Nursing Curriculum, it is expected that the nurse in the future will be better prepared to meet these needs both in the hospital and in the district. Unfortunately, the Health Visitor of today

is not fully prepared to render health service to the total family in a total environment as she lacks the basic nursing preparation. However with the introduction of the integrated Midwifery and Health Visitor course, the Health Visitor will be in a better position to cater to the needs of the people.

On the road of duty we see the Health Visitor as a personal and family friend, a consultant and a specialist, an angel of mercy to distressed and bereaved families, health educator, health co-ordinator, team worker, statistician, research worker, social reformer, organizer and, the leader of the society in and for which she lives.

A Friend of the Family

Health service to the family is an essential part of the Community Health Programme. Family health is the goal of all Public Health Services. The family has been recognized as a unit of the society consisting of father, mother and child or children of varying ages. The Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse through the very nature of their work, gained through a long period of education, is able to visualise the needs of the family. Her courteous and gentle manner coupled with her knowledge make her as an accepted friend of the family. The family confide in them social and related health problems with regard to expectant and nursing mothers, the care of infants and young children, care of the old etc. She enters the house as a guest of the family, while in office and at the clinic she is the hostess. She is guided by a sincere interest in the family and a desire to make her knowledge and skill available to them. She realises that past experiences of the patient and family play a dominant part in determining their reaction to her.

Courtesy, consideration, tact, interest, understanding, insight, respect for the individual, tolerance and respect for others point of view, are special qualities of the Public Health Nurse and the Health Visitor. She is a welcome friend to many a family.

As promotion, protection and maintenance of health are the goals of her service, she sees that the sickness and death rate in her community are kept to a minimum. Through her home visits she observes the home and family situation. She meets all the members of the family and tries to help them in their natural environment at their own ease and pace of understanding.

A Consultant and Specialist

Whether her place is in the home or at the clinic, the Public Health Nurse and Health Visitor is regarded as a consultant on matters affecting the health of the family, at all levels. She is able to give skilled assistance at the time of the birth of a child and also advise the mother in the proper upbringing and management of children. This includes regular feeding according to the needs of the child, sleep, clothing, fresh air and sun-light, avoidance of infection etc. In her capacity as a consultant, she knows her limitations and responsibilities, and also her assets and liabilities. She acts as a consultant at the various clinics of the hospital and welfare centre, and also as a technical assistant to the doctor in his various spheres of work. With the advancement of science and scientific knowledge in medicine and allied subjects, the duty of the Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse has widened in order to extend her services to all categories of people. Her place as a consultant is seen in homes, clinics, schools, factories, family planning clinics, Red Cross activities, relief work, and in social and educational programmes in the community.

An Angel of Mercy and a Healer of Diseases

The Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse brings health and happiness to individuals and members of the

family. She advises the family with regard to the care that the family should adopt at the time of sickness. This does not mean that she takes the entire responsibility of the patient. She works in close co-operation with the physician who is responsible for diagnosis and for treatment. The Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse sees that she gives care during the time of sickness and also teaches and demonstrates this care to an intelligent member of the family who will be constantly required in the home with the patient. She treats minor ailments in the family such as the common cold, constipation, scabies, indigestion etc. She is being looked upon by the family as an "angel of mercy" in bringing health and healing to the sick and the bereaved.

Health Educator

Health education is an integral part of all health services. Health education helps the individual to change his habits, customs, prejudices etc. consciously or unconsciously. Health education promotes health and health habits in all people. The Health Visitor and Public Health Nurse are the key persons in all Health Services to impart the knowledge of health to the community. She gives the knowledge of health to individuals and groups every where.

Health Co-ordinator

Her role as a health co-ordinator can be seen in her varied aspects of work. In all aspects of Health Services to the family, the Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse:

1. Helps to secure early medical diagnosis and prompt treatment to the sick.
2. Renders and secures the services of other associated groups for the promotion of health and prevention of disease.
3. Assists the family to carry out medical recommendations, and sanitary and social procedures for the prevention of diseases, in the promotion of health.
4. Guides the family in obtaining help from available agencies for necessary adjustment in the family which may

otherwise affect the health of the members of the family.

5. Helps in interpreting the physicians' instructions to the family.

6. Shares in community activities for the development of an adequate Public Health Programme and extension of activities.

Team Worker

Public Health activities are organised community actions by various Public Health and allied workers functioning in a team. Team work cannot be successful without its members working as links of a chain. Health Visitors and Public Health Nurses are essential links. They co-operate with medical practitioners, the sanitarians, the psychologists, the nutritionists, social workers, midwives, village *dais* and other auxiliary workers, for the promotion of the health and the community.

A Statistician

The status of health of any community, country or nation depends upon the progress made in its health standards. This is obtained from the accurate records and registers maintained by Health Visitors and Public Health Nurses at their various clinics. They collect and record accurate and relevant facts with regard to the incidence of births, diseases, deaths etc. and thus help to note factors which influence the prevalence of disease etc. in her locality. These reports and records are extremely valuable in assessing the health of the community and in the planning for better health for the community.

Research Worker

Public Health Nurses and Health Visitors working in the public health field, specially in the villages, make use of all the available resources for research

work. Each situation handled and each experience faced bring opportunities for research. Their registers and records, together with the observation and follow-up of the individual in the family and community, assist in finding out the success of her work and in explaining the means and ways of reaching desired goals.

A Social Reformer

Public Health Nurses and Health Visitors in their various aspects of work help in changing those habits and customs of the people which hinder the promotion of good health standards. Social evils such as early marriage, *purdah* and superstitious beliefs call for a very tactful approach.

Health Education is one of the most effective ways by which the Health Visitors and the Public Health Nurses may bring about reforms in the individual, family and community.

Organisers and Leaders

The Health Visitor and the Public Health Nurse is a democratic leader as she guides the family to prepare and participate in healthful living. Through her knowledge of the community needs and resources, she organises various activities to help with the community's endeavour to promote health and prevent disease. Considerable progress has been made during the past few years in developing educational facilities for health workers. The numbers trained and in training fall far short of the need however. Nursing education and working conditions have improved remarkably during the past 10 years. About 80,000 nurses are needed while only about 23,000 are available. There are about 800 Health Visitors and 200 qualified Public Health Nurses. A major part of the Public Health Nurse's role is played by the Health Visitor at present.

He is not only idle who does nothing, but he is idle who might employed.

—Socrates