

Health Visitors Section

The Hon. Secretary Mrs. E. E. David, Sir John Anderson's Health School, 46-C Gokal Boral Street, Calcutta, will be glad to hear from members of the Health Visitors League.

The Role of the Public Health Nurse in the Prevention of Infant Mortality

BY

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Public Health nursing is a service which is organized to give service in the health field to the individual, the family and the community. When it was first started it was confined mainly to the nursing care of the sick in their homes. It has now expanded to include the teaching of positive health. Public health nurses, or as they are called in some countries, health visitors, are, or should be, fully qualified nurses, who have in addition received some special preparation for their job. This preparation includes lecture courses in the public health aspects of such specific subjects as maternal and child health, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, nutrition, school health, etc. In addition to the theory there must be field observation and experience so that the nurse has an opportunity to apply her knowledge under supervision. The preparation must also include emphasis on health teaching; not only is it necessary to know what to teach but the nurse must understand how people learn, and she must know the most appropriate technique to use to make that learning as effective as possible. For example, just telling a mother that her child needs Vitamin D does not necessarily mean that she has learned this fact and will put her learning into action by seeing that her child gets the foods which supply Vitamin D. The public health nurse must also be very aware of the social welfare aspects of ill-health, because, as we all know, health (both physical and mental) and social welfare are very closely related and to consider the one without the other is useless.

Therefore the public health nurse must have an understanding of social welfare and work in close relationship with the representatives of the social agencies.

Public health nurses are in the main employed by an agency which may be established for one or more of a number of special health services, or by an agency set up to render a generalized or family health service. For the specialized services, such as maternal and child health, school health, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, the nurses are engaged in the one specific field. In the generalized services each nurse has an area or district and within it she is responsible for the health visiting to the families and individuals who reside in that area. She will be concerned with the pre-natal cases, the infant and pre-school age group, school children, tuberculosis cases and their contacts, communicable diseases and the bedside nursing care required in the homes. For this latter function she may need assistants in the form of auxiliary workers. Experience in many countries has shown that the generalized service is more effective since it avoids unnecessary duplication of several visitors to one home, and thereby eliminates confusion which frequently occurs when instruction is given by more than one person. The chief function of the nurse in whichever type of service she is engaged is the teaching of health. She does this through her contact with individuals in the home, in clinic conferences and through group classes.

Now what specifically is the role of the public health nurse in the prevention of infant mortality? Mitchell Nelson lists the six chief causes of infant mortality as prematurity, birth injuries, congenital

anomalies, respiratory infections, gastro-intestinal infections and communicable diseases. The public health nurse has a role to play in the prevention of all of these.

The importance of pre-natal care in the prevention of the first two causes, and possibly the third, is well recognized. What is the function of the nurse in this care? Through her home visiting, group teaching, or in her conferences at pre-natal clinics she is able to emphasize the importance of regular medical supervision. She is able to instruct the expectant mother in the many details which are necessary for the physical as well as the mental preparation for the new baby. These details are frequently the very things which cause the most worry and yet the ones which the mother considers too trivial to take the time of the doctor in his busy clinic. Nutrition is most important in the pre-natal period and it is in this field that the nurse can do very effective teaching through group and individual conferences and demonstrations. In carrying out her role in pre-natal care the nurse does not supplant the doctor, but rather she supplements the advice he has to give. Careful delivery technique is an important factor in the prevention of birth injuries. In countries where there is a great shortage of doctors the majority of babies are delivered in the home, with or without the assistance of a midwife who may, or may not, be trained. In such cases the public health nurse should be in a position to give instruction and supervision to the midwives working in her area. Unfortunately in countries where this supervision is most needed there are few, if any, public health nurses.

After the birth of the child, through her home visits and child health conferences, the public health nurse advises the mother in the care of the child, and in good health practices, which will help to prevent respiratory and gastro-intestinal infections. She also teaches the value of immunization for those diseases which can be prevented in that way.

She emphasizes the importance of early immunization and encourages the mother to take the child to the doctor for this service. The public health nurse teaches the methods of protecting the child from becoming infected by other persons who may have a communicable disease.

It is, of course, not possible to estimate the extent to which the public health nurse contributes to the reduction in infant mortality, but it is a fact that in those countries where public health programmes (including public health nursing) are well developed, infant mortality is lower. It is generally agreed that because of the many individual and sustained contacts the most effective teacher of health in the health agency is the well-qualified public health nurse.

The public health nurse is in a position to be of service to both the obstetrician and the paediatrician. To the obstetrician she frequently refers expectant mothers who might not seek medical supervision until late in their pregnancy. She helps to make his teaching more effective by actual demonstration to the mother in the home or in the clinic. For the mother who is to be delivered at home by the doctor, the public health nurse supervises the preparation for the confinement and assists the doctor at the time of delivery. To the paediatrician she refers children for immunization and prevention of illness. She refers many cases in the early stages of illness which might not otherwise have medical care until much harm has resulted. The obstetrician and the paediatrician will in their turn find the public health nurse ready to follow up in the home or school the cases for which public health nursing supervision is needed.

In summary, it is clear that a good public health nursing service is essential for the development of a complete public health programme of which maternal and child health services are an important part. The nurses must be well prepared and able to teach sound public health practices.

