THE DEFINITION AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH NURSING

A Statement of the APHA Public Health Nursing Section

2013

This document reaffirms the 1996 American Public Health Association Public Health Nursing Section definition statement, and puts it in the context of current public health nursing practice.

Definition

Public health nursing is the practice of promoting and protecting the health of populations using knowledge from nursing, social, and public health sciences.

The public health nurse (PHN) assesses, anticipates, considers, and responds to factors in the health system environment including emerging health trends, health and economic policies, and social and environmental justice issues. The goal is to improve population health through health promotion, disease prevention, and risk reduction strategies. Public health nursing advocacy and population interventions are guided by the assessment of multiple determinants of health through an ecological model. With this multi-level and interconnected view of health, public health nursing action occurs through community applications of health related theory and a commitment to health equity.

Public health nursing is differentiated from other nursing specialties by its essential focus on population health promotion and emphasis on primary prevention and upstream contributors to community health problems. Together these characteristics form the foundation of public health nursing, even though either of these distinguishing qualities alone may be found in other nursing specialties. The practice of the PHN is guided by the Quad Council of Public Health Nursing Organizations’ Core Competencies for PHNs and the American Nurses’ Association Public Health Nursing: Scope & Standards of Practice.

Public Health Nursing Practice

Key characteristics of practice include: 1) a focus on the health needs of an entire population, including the unique needs of sub-populations, and inequities in health within populations; 2) assessment of population health using a comprehensive systematic process; 3) attention to broad determinants of health; 4) an emphasis on primary prevention, and 5) applying interventions at all levels—individuals and families, the communities in which they live, and the systems that impact their health.

Public Health Nurse Perspective

PHNs aim to improve the health outcomes of all people. They apply an ecological perspective, acknowledging the complexity of public health problems and the contextual nature of health—including physical, social, cultural and historical factors. With their clinical understanding of health and illness, PHNs maintain the ability to address individuals’ needs within the context of population health profiles and the systems that are affected. Using systems-level thinking, PHNs take into consideration assets, needs, and disparities of individuals and populations and translate this into action for public good.

Public Health Nurse Activities and Practice Settings

Public health nursing activities have been described in domains depicted by the Public Health Intervention Wheel and the 10 Essential Public Health Services. This work includes health teaching,
policy development, and community collaboration. PHNs are employed in diverse settings and for many different types of agencies and organizations, including all levels of government, community-based and other nongovernmental service organizations, policy think tanks, and academic and nonacademic research groups. They work as members and leaders of multidisciplinary, interagency teams to assure and promote health. While the specific programs and interventions they employ vary, PHNs respond to priorities that emerge from a comprehensive assessment of health issues and concerns of the public served. Those working in governmental settings may be charged with the responsibility to enforce laws and regulations related to protecting and promoting the public’s health.

Factors Influencing Public Health Nursing

With the United States’ focus on comprehensive healthcare reform, PHNs are well-prepared to lead national and local efforts to realign emerging systems of care that locate population health, health promotion, and disease prevention at the nucleus of a reformed system. Despite this, there has been a decrease in positions and funding for PHNs resulting in reduced access to healthcare—particularly for marginalized populations.8 This juxtaposition of eroding positions yet an increasing need for PHN-provided services calls for initiatives to build a strong, well-educated PHN workforce that can both lead and implement change at local, state, and national levels.

Health Reform

The 2010 passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) greatly altered the landscape for healthcare and health improvement in the United States, opening up roles and responsibilities for PHNs. The ACA includes goals to 1) improve the individual healthcare experience; 2) reduce the cost of healthcare; and 3) improve the health of populations. With their population focus and their positions embedded within communities, PHNs are vital leaders and members of inter-professional teams assuring that all people have equitable access to high quality care through health system reform.9 Their assessment skills and system-level perspectives can assure that local needs are met and services are coordinated.

Additionally, emerging healthcare models require public health nursing leadership and provide opportunities that integrate primary care and public health.10 Primary care and public health share a focus on population health, transitional care, and care coordination across settings to promote health through data exchange. Increasing numbers of PHNs work in global health in response to trends towards global responsibility and connectivity. With the implementation of many healthcare reform efforts emphasizing population-wide interventions, it is increasingly apparent that PHNs are well suited to meet the demands of an ever-changing healthcare system.11

Determinants of Health

Eliminating population health disparities by addressing determinants that lead to poor health is a national goal for which PHNs are positioned to provide leadership—through public policy reform efforts, community-building, and system-level change within their scope of practice.12 Multiple (social, physical, and environmental) determinants explain most health disparities in the U.S. and impact the populations most often served by PHNs.13,14,15,16,17 Socioeconomic disadvantages, such as poverty, low levels of education, and belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group, are more robust risk factors of poor health than a lack of access to healthcare or genetic predisposition to disease.18,19,20 While the discipline of
nursing was founded on improving environmental conditions to facilitate health at the bedside, PHNs focus on improving population health in the environments in which people live, work, learn, and play.

Educational Requirements and Certification

The baccalaureate degree in nursing (BSN) is recommended for entry-level PHNs. Baccalaureate curricula emphasize fundamental concepts for public health nursing practice such as health promotion, illness prevention and population health, healthcare policy, financing and regulatory environments, interprofessional collaboration, organizational and system leadership, and healthcare quality.

Those with a master’s degree or higher and with specialization in population-level health, demonstrate the knowledge and skills required for leadership positions. Competencies include mastery of interprofessional collaboration, program planning and evaluation, health policy and advocacy, and prevention strategies. The doctorate of nursing practice (DNP) degree has emerged in the last decade to provide the foundation for advanced practice in executive leadership and systems development. The doctorate of philosophy (PhD) and other research-focused doctoral degrees remain the preparation for PHNs to develop public health nursing science and generate the evidence needed to guide practice. In some states a PHN certification is needed to signify a nurse’s specific competence and expertise in public health nursing. National PHN certification is available through American Nurses Credentialing Center.

Summary

This definition supports the position that PHNs provide leadership for emerging advances in health and healthcare—particularly in terms of addressing health inequities and resulting disparities. Equipped with a baccalaureate degree, PHNs are prepared to address multiple determinants of health and participate fully in the challenges of attaining and maintaining population health. With a scope of practice that includes policy reform, community-building, health promotion, and system-level changes to promote and protect the health of populations, PHNs are essential collaborators in health improvement.

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