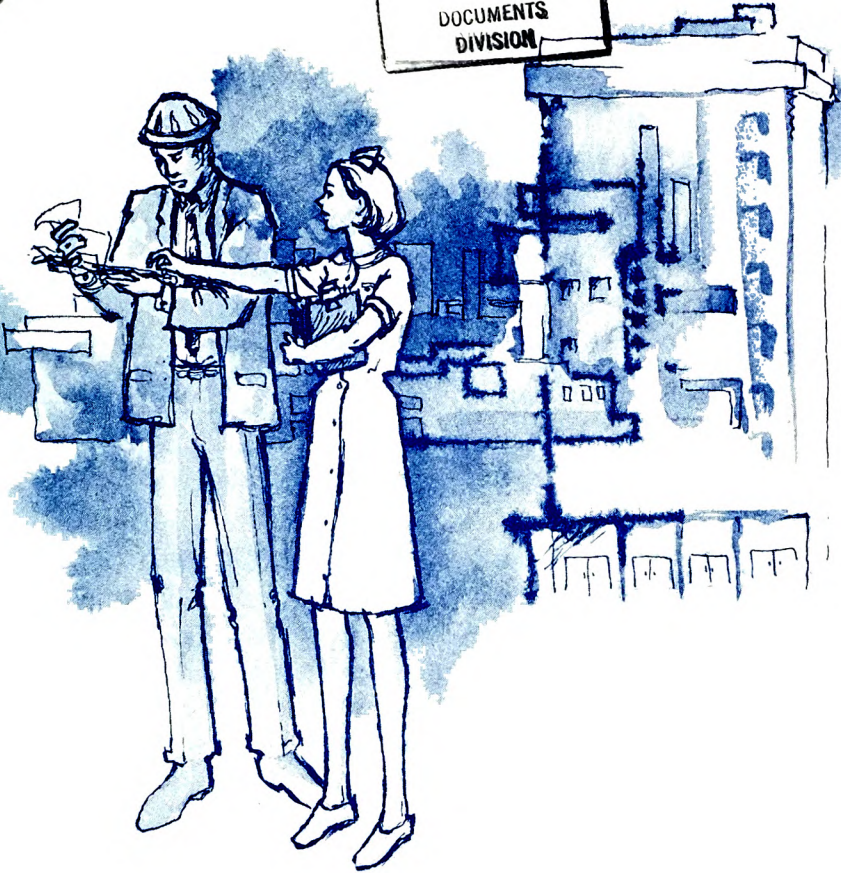


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**THE ROLE OF
THE NURSE IN
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH
NURSING**

THE ROLE OF THE NURSE IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSING

The role of the occupational health nurse is to protect and improve the health of people at work. Her patients are several hundred--or even several thousand--of America's 80 million job holders. Her work place is the health unit of the factory, or bank, or shipyard, or department store where the workers earn their livelihood.

The care she gives is at times preventive, at times curative, and at other times rehabilitative. Increasingly, in today's programs, it is preventive in nature. Not only does she provide expert nursing care to the sick and injured, but she also plays a role in preventing injury to workers from dusts, fumes, chemicals, and hazardous agents in the industrial environment.

The fact that the occupational health nurse practices her profession, not in the hospital, not at the bedside, but at the workplace opens up a new and broad vista of service. Applying her skills to the maintenance of good health for the men and women in the industry where she works provides a broad dimension for the utilization of her professional capabilities.

Where Does the Occupational Health Nurse Work?

Occupational health nurses work in banks, hotels, and large office buildings, on missile bases, in distilleries, steel mills, chemical plants, and department stores--wherever fairly large numbers of people are employed. The majority of occupational health nurses work in manufacturing industries and in plants having over 500 employees.

In large plants, the nurse is a key member of the industrial health team, which may include physicians, toxicologists,

industrial hygienists, safety engineers, and technical assistants.

In smaller industries, the nurse may be the only full-time professional health worker with a day-to-day responsibility for the entire health program. In this unique situation, she discovers that her nursing skills may be applied to a wide variety of demanding activities, many of them resembling those of the physician, health educator, or engineer.

What Does She Do?

Although the job responsibility of the occupational health nurse varies from plant to plant, her work will generally include most of the following activities:

She gives expert nursing care to injured and ill workers and keeps herself and the health unit ready for any kind of emergency.

She gives medically-directed rehabilitative treatment to injured, or chronically ill workers.

She helps conduct company-wide immunization and disease screening programs.

She assists with physical examinations and health evaluation programs.

She counsels emotionally disturbed workers.

She teaches and motivates workers to be safety-minded and health-conscious.

She assists workers in the use of community health and welfare resources for their own and their families' needs.

She is familiar with and interprets medical care and insurance plans, as well as legislation covering Workman's Compensation, disability, labor, health, and safety codes.

She knows the health hazards associated with her industry and is alert to symptoms of acute or chronic occupational disease.

What Does She Need to Know?

The occupational health nurse utilizes all of her basic nursing skills. To function effectively, however, she must broaden her knowledge in other related areas.

She needs to acquire expert knowledge of community health and welfare resources, of legislation and regulations affecting the worker, of company programs and policies relating to health care, insurance, and disability.

She needs to understand the physical, chemical, and biological health hazards of her particular industrial environment. She needs to acquaint herself with the fundamentals of industrial hygiene and engineering by which a healthful work environment is controlled and maintained. She needs to learn to recognize early signs and symptoms of diseases originating from the work environment.

She learns how to carry out case-finding programs.

She needs to understand the relationship between labor and management and her own relationship with other company departments.

She may need special preparation in the field of mental health. With the ever-growing recognition of psychological factors in illness, health education and counselling are assuming real importance. The nurse can play a key role in recognizing these psychological problems and in planning care for the employee.

Nursing Part-Time in Industry

Two-thirds of the American work force are employed in plants with fewer than 500 workers, and most of these small establishments provide no in-plant health services. Where employment of a full-time nurse is not feasible, public health nursing organizations can meet the need for services.* The

*A guide on the provision of part-time nursing services in industry is available from the Occupational Health Program.

duties and responsibilities of a nurse working part-time in industry are broad and challenging, and she will find that the rewards of her services are well worth her efforts.

Student Nurse Field Experience in Industry

Orientation programs in the field of occupational health are being conducted for student nurses in a number of industries throughout the country. The major objectives and advantages of such a program may be described as follows:

1. To develop an understanding of the nurse's role in an occupational health unit.
2. To develop nursing skills in the care of occupational injuries and illnesses.
3. To familiarize the student nurse with the activities of the health unit in relation to the other department functions.
4. To familiarize the student nurse with the working environment of an industrial employee and its decided relation to his health.
5. To assist the student nurse to better understand the hospitalized individual who is preparing to return to his work place.

Historical Background

In 1895 the first industrial nurse in the United States assumed her duties. The president of the Vermont Marble Company, motivated by his own concern for employee welfare, influenced his Board of Directors to employ a "district" nurse. Ada Mayo Stewart was engaged to work among the employees of the company. Her position was that of a visiting nurse. She went into the homes of the employees to give care to the sick and into the schools to teach health to children.

World War I stimulated the growth of occupational health nursing. In the factories and in the shipyards turning out war materiel, for the first time nurses were widely employed

to staff first aid rooms. Between 1914 and 1930, 47 states enacted Workman's Compensation laws giving added impetus to the establishment of accident prevention and in-plant emergency care programs.

The depression years of the 1930's slowed the growth of occupational health nursing. To meet the special needs of this difficult period, the occupational health nurse became a health counsellor and health educator, and this new role gained acceptance.

During World War II, maintaining the health of the work force was of utmost importance. Industrial health services gave increasing attention to preventive measures designed to maintain the health and productivity of workers.

Today, the importance of conserving the total health of the worker continues to gain recognition. The advancing age level of the working population and the rising incidence of chronic and degenerative diseases have increased the need for early detection and prevention of all diseases. Many companies now require periodic health examinations. Workers themselves are health-conscious and anxious to participate in immunization programs and mass screening programs to detect diseases. Health education and counselling are increasingly recognized as essential to effective health programs in industry. New mental health programs reflect a growing understanding of the psychological factors in illness.

The role of the nurse in these programs is that identified in 1859 by Florence Nightingale: "Nursing is not only a service to the sick, it is a service to the well. We have to teach people how to live." It is teaching people how to live that presents the greatest challenge for the nurse who works in industry, and it is her contribution to employee health conservation.

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