
School Nurses in Australia and Their Role –Health Education at School and Society–

Nicholas G. Procter¹, Shigeo Kataoka² and Yukio Kataoka³

¹ Faculty of Nursing, University of South Australia

² Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University of Education

³ Faculty of Education, Chiba University

Introduction

The primary role of school nurses in Australia is to protect, preserve and promote health of the school child (Staunton, 1983). There is also an expectation from both the profession and the public for school nurses to actively seek to resolve immediate health and social problems as they relate to and impact upon the wellbeing of the child and the child's family.

This paper begins by examining the nature of Australian society and the definition of Australian nursing. We will then move to identify the roles of the Australian school nurse with specific reference to work and community responsibilities.

Key Health Issues and Social Trends in Australian Society

While a majority of Australians speak English and come from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, over one hundred different languages are spoken every day. This gives rise to the multicultural nature of Australian society and health care practices.

Australia has a total population of 17.7 million people, and South Australia a population of 1.5 million. The median age of Australians is 34 years and life expectancy of males is 75.1 years and for females 80.9 years.

With respect of those educated, Australia has made significant gains over recent years. More school students are staying at secondary school than at any other time in our history. Everyday people are

participating more in education and spending more time at it – about 6 hours a day on average. The number of degree holders has jumped 400% since 1971, to more than 8 per cent nationally.

The average weekly income for a full time employed adult (working around 40.4 hours per week in paid employment) is \$589 in South Australia, compared to \$616 nationally. Women in South Australia earn only about 86 percent of this average South Australian income and this may be due to many more women in part time work as well as unequal distribution of women in managerial and senior positions.

Like several other nations world wide, Australia does have a steadily accumulating group of unemployed and the figures are not good. The number of Australian people on unemployment benefits has tripled since 1989 to around 914,000 today (11% nationally and 11.5% in South Australia).

On the health side, there is an alarming youth suicide trend, with 16.7 deaths per 100,000 people nationally. Australia comes fourth in the world behind Iceland, Finland and New Zealand for death by suicide. Hanging and strangulation are the most common forms of death and these are on the increase amongst people aged 15–24 years. Those most likely to commit suicide are young men, more often from a rural (outback) background.

The heart disease death rate (per 100,000) in Australia is 180 and the cancer death rate (per 100,000) is 183. It is at this point in my paper that we would

like to change direction by looking at the role and function of Nursing with implications for practice.

Australian Nursing: Definitions and Implications for Practice

Contemporary Australian Nursing has been influenced by such factors as:

The changing role of women in our society, Advances in science and technology, and the resulting ethico-legal dilemmas, Advances in health care policy, The changing demand for the nursing workforce, The emergence of a more multicultural population, The advancement of nursing to Australian Universities.

Nursing in Australia is considered both an art and a science. It is a patient centred service and discrete health care discipline with it's own code of practice and governing regulations. The essence of nursing is caring and the focus of nursing is on the promotion of an optimal health state for the individual no matter who or where they are. Up to this point in our paper we have identified the nature of Australian society and Australian nursing. It is important that this background is mentioned because it relates to and impacts upon the many health and social factors in the role context of the School Nurse. We will now present details of the role and function of Australian School Nurses.

Australian School Nursing:

The history of Australian school nursing dates back to the mid 1970's with the appointment of 10 nurses in South Australia to work in what was once known as 'Priority Project High Schools'(Davies, 1994:4). Five of these nurses are still employed with the South Australian Child Adolescent and Family Health Service, the principle employer of South Australian School Nurses. The primary role of these nurses over the past 20 years is to continue to provide nursing services to children irrespective of age, sex, ethnic background who may or may not be disadvantaged by socio-

economic background, being of non-English speaking background, or intellectual disability.

From these early beginnings, Australian school nursing activity continues across a variety of practice settings. More often than not this means community based practice with locations in metropolitan, rural and remote areas(Hart, 1993). The school nurse strives to prevent disease or retard its progress, provide health assessments and participate in health promotion activities. Given the incidence of death and preventable disease outlined at the beginning of this paper, it is understandable that there must be major emphasis on health promotion, health teaching, information sharing, identification of major resources, counselling or support(NHMRC 1991).

But there is more to consider in the role of the School Nurse. Interpersonal skills are also essential and these include:

- Good listening and observation skills

- Advanced written and verbal communication skills

- The ability to empathise and relate to peers, other members of the community, children and their families

- Ability to apply problem solving techniques

- Ability to manage and evaluate allocated workload.

The above skills are also necessary to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with other human service providers. In remote and isolated areas, the nurse functions as a primary care provider. The nurse in the 'outback' (that is, harsh, often dry and hot conditions) works in a remote and isolated area. This may include Aboriginal settlements, remote homesteads and small townships. Collard(1994) in a recent paper outlines the evolution of the Northern Territory School Nurse as she/he negotiates the isolation and long distances characteristic of this practice setting. Australian society expects the national (State owned and financed) school system to have a commanding influence over all aspects of a child's school life. This invariably includes the health and wellbeing of children.

Contemporary Issues in the Role of the Australian School Nurse

Perhaps the most pressing issue confronting Australian School Nurses today is the recent Federal Government Decision to implement the National Mental Health Policy. This is a contemporary health issue impacting upon the role of the nurse across a variety of practice settings. In particular, a means of ensuring that mental health of the community is "everyone's business". Not just the business of a few specialist health professionals. For School Nurses this means that they must be able to better assess and relate to children who are distressed and/or suffering from mental health problems. School nursing also involves the identification of health problems through qualitative and quantitative research techniques that can then be addressed by strategic planning. This will not only serve to improve the mental health of the child, but also seek to benefit their educational opportunities as well as decrease stress of the parents and family.

Health Education in Society

Australian society expects the national school system to bring out the best in their children. To help them learn and grow into healthy, bright young people and fine citizens. The emphasis on this societal expectation is no more true for the many schools that are assisted by the School Nurse. This also makes school nursing unique because it is practiced in an educational setting.

Australian School Nurses believe that all children have the right to be as healthy as they can. Being healthy helps them to be happy, to enjoy life and to manage the business of learning and growing. To assist in these aims, School Nurses will periodically check (depending upon age and family history) such physical attributes as vision, Hearing, co-ordination and balance and some aspects of physical development. This service is 'free of cost' to the child and the child's family and is accompanied by further information such

as a referral to a medical specialist as necessary.

The Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council are currently overseeing the formulation of a national policy and strategy plan for children and young people. The age range reflects United Nations and World Health Organisation philosophy and policy.

Below is a list of issues that are of direct relevance to health education as provided by School Nurses at a societal level:

The relationship between nutrition and economic status

Arrangements for care of sick children when parents work outside the home

Promotion of high speed cars and fast driving in television commercials

The failure of the States (eg: South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria) and the commonwealth Government to agree on the restriction of alcohol advertising

The need for drug and alcohol services in schools

Better and more sensitive care and treatment of attempted suicide patients in hospitals.

Increasing the profile and role of the nurse in school and nurse practitioners in youth health.

(Adapted from Vidovich 1994:25)

Educational Preparation of Australian School Nurses

While there are no formal University programs designed as compulsory for School Nurses, it is essential that each nurse is Registered as a General Nurse with the Nurses' Board of South Australia. It is the foundation knowledge of General Nursing that facilitates health appraisal by the school nurse.

Instead there is an expectation that nurses who chose to specialise in School Nursing are committed to ongoing staff development and further education.

There is also an implicit expectation that nurses are dedicated and resolute to a career in this highly specialised field.

Having said this, there are however several

programs that are considered highly desirable for those who specialise in School Nursing to pursue. These are;

Qualification in community child health nursing such as community Child Health Nursing; Graduate Certificate Child Adolescent Child Health; Health Visitor Certificate or Infant Welfare Certificate.

Furthermore it is essential that School Nurses have a knowledge and understanding of: Child development and behaviour; Group work skills essential elements required for healthy and effective parenting; Primary health care principles, and Social Justice and Equal Opportunity principles.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is increasing responsibility and expectation by a variety of organisations and groups for the provision of health interviewing, promotion of health, prevention of ill health and the detection of problems in the school age child falling on the Australian School Nurse.

The nature of disease profile, incidence of mortality and morbidity as well as the socio-demographic profile of Australian society influence the role and function of the School Nurse. It has been recognised that the School Nurse has an integral part to play in the advancement of child/adolescent health that is not only of value in its own right, but also contribute to the

health and wellbeing of a key natural resource and our future: children.

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