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**MAXIMISING, OPTIMISING, EMPOWERING:
THE WORK OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE IN A
COLLEGE SETTING**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Nursing
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focuses on the work of one Public Health Nurse delivering primary health care to potentially 950 students during her regular weekly visits to their suburban college. The interesting interface of health and education is captured by a single-case study design. In its ninety years of existence, public health nursing has seen very little research into practice, least of all practice in a secondary school or college. Data was collected from one primary participant in the form of two reflective monologues, six interviews taped at weekly intervals and five participant-observation sessions, and three taped interviews with senior school staff. The use of Yin's (1984) framework for data analysis generated support for the proposition that adolescent health was a great need in the nurse's area. Current literature shows that adolescence is one of the fastest growing areas of need in health today, particularly because of concern with New Zealand's high rate of youth suicide and poor mental health services for this age group. In keeping with the philosophy of primary health care, health promotion and self-responsibility, three key themes and associated subthemes were generated from the data. These were maximising ('working with' and 'working without'), optimising ('building' and 'breaking') and empowering ('using the critical moment' and 'sustaining the self'). These concepts encapsulate the substantial contribution that the Public Health Nurse participant made to adolescent health in a college. In 'working with' the student, the college staff, the nurse's colleagues, as well as the community, the nurse made a difference by 'maximising' or making the most of the moments she spent with the students in making decisions about their health. Issues, including sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, are further articulated in the optimising and empowering themes which look at the need for young people to hope by empowering themselves to cope with the future. The nurse was seen by the staff at the college as a vital part of the community. It was this connection that was most valued for the balanced perspective that the Public Health Nurse brought to the college in her weekly visits.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This study is about the work of a Public Health Nurse with adolescents and adults in a college setting. The introduction will provide an overview of the study, how it evolved and what was involved in the process of carrying it out. This will then be followed by an explanation about the layout of the thesis. The content and sequence of chapters will be described in relation to one another, as well as to the study as a whole. Its relevance to nursing and nurturing the needs of adolescents will also be discussed.

Background to the study

The focus for this thesis is on a single Public Health Nurse working with adolescent students during her regular weekly visits to their college. Taking a single case study approach, it examines in depth the complex processes involved in the delivery of primary health care to these young people in the naturalistic environment of their college.

This study evolved from an earlier one which surveyed sixteen Public Health Nurses for the work they did in primary schools (O'Sullivan, 1993). When I thanked the nurses on that occasion for their rich contextual data, one of them happened to remark,

Oh! But you should see what I do in my college - I do much more work there with the young people than I do with those in my primary schools.

I was naturally inquisitive to know more. This first experience in research had taught me the value of indepth interviews when exploring human responses to actual or potential health problems encountered in the field of public health nursing. Therefore, I decided to study the work of one Public Health Nurse in a way which would allow issues to emerge as they do in the course of the nurse's daily work. It would also allow me to identify where Public Health Nurses made

a difference to the health and wellbeing of their clients. Much of this work is taken for granted, and yet it emanates from a nursing expertise that has tended to remain silent and invisible for too long.

Another reason why I carried out this study was to learn about an area reputed to be one of the fastest growing in New Zealand today. Although I was an experienced Public Health Nurse, I had to admit to having limited experience with adolescence, and much more familiarity with the younger age group in primary and intermediate schools. Hence, the thesis has given me a rare insight into adolescence which I have already put to good use in my everyday practice. It has also taught me the importance of recognising and affirming the skills of others, and valuing the way in which their collegiality and expertise can complement my own work for the benefit of clients.

Overview of the study

The study began in May 1994 and data collection was completed in September that same year. For personal as well as professional reasons (see p. 138-141), analysis and writing has taken longer than anticipated. The goodwill of the participants was exemplary and I hope this study does justice to the major contribution they made in the form of interviews and participant observation sessions.

There was one key participant in this study. The Public Health Nurse began by recording her reflections about her work on two monologue tapes. Then I commenced weekly taped interviews with the nurse after each of her clinics over the course of six weeks. I also interviewed the Deputy Principal, the School Guidance Counsellor and a teacher to obtain their views on the work of the Public Health Nurse in adolescent health care at their college. These interviews were purposely left open and unstructured in order to allow the emergence of issues which might not have been captured if a more structured framework had been imposed.

There were also five participant observation sessions that opportunistically arose within the course of the study. These allowed me to observe the nurse in a workshop setting with students and/or parents, when she delivered important messages about prevention, health promotion and self responsibility. As happened in her clinic work, many health issues arose during these sessions,

requiring a wide range of nursing skills. Topics covered included sexuality, drugs and alcohol, child abuse, anorexia, truancy, depression, behaviour, menstruation, hygiene, vision, orthodontics, tuberculosis, cardiac and cultural needs.

The study provides an answer to the exploratory question: "What sort of work is the Public Health Nurse doing with adolescents in a college?". The explanatory question, "How does the Public Health Nurse deliver primary health care to students in a college?" was answered by the theoretical development of three themes: MAXIMISING, OPTIMISING and EMPOWERING. They identify the essence of the work of the nurse as she connected with the students, and helped them to make decisions in the "here and now" that would potentially make a positive impact on their future.

Young people need to be nurtured in ways that are safe and culturally acceptable. This nurturance has never been more urgently needed than at the present time when there are real concerns for young people in New Zealand.

Overview of the thesis

The thesis is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the literature related to public health nursing's involvement with adolescent health over its ninety years of existence. Only a small amount of research has ever been carried out in the general area of public health nursing, with only the occasional indirect reference to the role of the Public Health Nurse in a college. This deficiency is evident despite the current plethora of adolescent literature, particularly with its emphasis on youth suicide, depression and the mental health of New Zealand young people.

Chapter 2 presents the research methodology along with the aims and objectives for this study. It reviews the general case study method and the single-case study design used for this research. Details concerning participant selection are given along with a description of the college setting in which the research takes place. The method for data collection and analysis is outlined. Issues for ethical consideration are raised and these include acknowledging the ongoing need for informed consent as distinct from a one time signing event before the study commences. Rigorous steps were taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants, the college and any third party who became

involved in the course of data collection. Students were not interviewed at any time in the course of the research.

Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of the research outcome including an explanation of the three major themes and their associated subthemes. Collectively, these support the proposition that adolescents have many health needs and Public Health Nurses have much to offer in this area. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, each of the major themes is identified, defined and discussed, supported by stories from the data. Verbatim quotes are recorded in italics and are preceded with a brief introduction explaining how they illustrate the meaning of the theme. Some key points are underlined for emphasis.

Chapter 4 presents the theme, MAXIMISING, with its associated subthemes, Working with and Working without. The former relates to those paradigmatic moments in the "here and now", when the nurse is working with the student, working with the college staff and working with the community health staff. Here, the emphasis is on partnerships of various kinds. Working without refers to the nurse working in the community, "without" the walls of an institution which could affect her accessibility. This subtheme is about community connection, and illustrates the way the nurse uses practical knowledge and networking skills in the community.

Chapter 5 focuses on hope as embodied in the theme entitled, OPTIMISING, with its accompanying subthemes of Building and Breaking. These imply the building up of strengths, the breaking down of barriers and the breaking through from resistance to success. Young people are given the opportunity to look at all the possibilities within each given situation they face. The nurse can be seen working in a variety of scenarios that focus on the future for young people.

The third theme, EMPOWERING is described in Chapter 6. It follows on from the two previous themes, and presents the premise that "maximising" and "optimising" are not effective if people are not empowered to make the changes necessary for their health and wellbeing. It also maintains that only people can empower themselves, but that they can be supported and inspired by others to seek health through their own self-determination. Different aspects of empowering are explored under the two subthemes. One is dedicated to the client (Using the critical moment) and the other to the nurse (Sustaining the self).

Chapter 7 is the final chapter in which the findings from the study are discussed in an overview of the three themes. They are related to the literature, and the implications for adolescent health and public health nursing are also discussed with several recommendations being made for this particular area of practice. Limitations of the study are then explored along with suggestions for further study. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion on what I have learned from this study, as a Public Health Nurse, researcher and person, and this is recounted as a journey.