

Environmental Justice: Impact on Nursing Practice

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At first blush, environmental justice may seem unrelated to nursing practice. After all, how does the environment impact the way a nurse performs procedures (such as catheterizations, blood draws, starting IVs, etc.)? But a more comprehensive view of the nursing profession reveals that environmental justice is intimately related to nursing practice, because nurses are concerned with *people* and not just *procedures*. This paper addresses some of the ways nursing practice is impacted by environmental justice and gives practical applications for improving nursing practice through involvement in advocating for environmental justice.

What is Environmental Justice?

A discussion of environmental justice as it relates to nursing practice must naturally begin with an understanding of environmental justice. According to Dr. Robert Bullard, “[e]nvironmental justice embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of our environmental, health, employment, education, housing, transportation, and civil rights laws” (University of California Television, 2009, 5:18). This definition includes health as a basic right of all people. However, as Dr. Bullard points out, health status is profoundly impacted by an individual’s environment. He defines environment as “everything: it’s where we live, work, play, worship, go to school, as well as the physical and natural world” (University of California Television, 2009, 3:24). Therefore, environmental justice is the idea that all people have a right to health status that is not negatively impacted by the environment in which they find themselves.

How Does Environmental Justice Impact Nursing Practice?

As any nurse is aware, the purpose of nursing is to improve the health of individuals and populations. Dr. Bullard defines health as “more than the absence of disease or infirmity”

(University of California Television, 2009, 2:44), and nurses will readily agree with this definition. He goes on to state that “you cannot have a healthy community if you have poverty, unemployment, if you have communities overrun with toxic waste and poison” (University of California Television, 2009, 2:47). Acute and primary care nurses work intimately with individuals and families daily, and community and public health nurses work regularly with populations and aggregates. Nurses have an up-close and personal view of how the environment impacts the health of their clients, and can attest to Dr. Bullard’s claim that where a person lives and the environment they are exposed to has a direct impact on their health and quality of life (University of California Television, 2009). Therefore, promoting and ensuring environmental justice for *all* people is intimately related to the work of nursing.

Strategies for Nurses to Improve Environmental Justice

Because nurses have a broad view of the health impacts of unsafe and unjust environments, they are uniquely positioned to advocate for change. According to Finkelman (2015), some concrete actions nurses can and should take include lobbying legislators for positive changes to health care laws, campaigning for political candidates who understand and support the importance of healthcare and environmental justice, supporting health care reform, joining and supporting political action committees that are dedicated to electing candidates concerned with health care issues, holding public offices where their influence can be used to improve healthcare policies, and voting en masse on healthcare issues and reforms. These actions can have a significantly positive impact on the health of all people. Nurses, as a highly respected and trusted group, must consistently advocate for the needs and rights of their clients.

Conclusion

Clearly, environmental justice is intimately related to nursing practice. Nurses cannot avoid encountering ways in which injustices related to housing, health care access, air quality, and many other environmental issues influence the health of their clients. As they become aware of these injustices, nurses have a moral and ethical responsibility to advocate for changes in laws and policies that impact the availability of environmental justice to all. By advocating for positive change, nurses focus on up-stream solutions to the health concerns their clients experience. This assists nurses in accomplishing their ultimate goal: improving the health of individuals and populations.

References

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