

Nurses and Environmental Health

Success Through Action



Illustrations From Across the Nation

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES
AND DISEASE REGISTRY

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The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Since Florence Nightingale's time, the environment has been viewed as a major domain of nursing concern, yet few nurses and other health care providers receive any formal environmental health education or training. We breathe the air, drink the water, and, in today's society, are potentially exposed to many chemicals at work, at home, and in our communities. The environment is an element that interplays with human health and demands the attention and understanding of health care providers, especially nurses.

The landmark 1995 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Nursing, Health, and the Environment: Strengthening the Relationship to Improve the Public's Health*, called for basic environmental competencies for registered nurses. These competencies include basic knowledge and concepts; assessment and referral; advocacy, ethics, and risk communication; and legislation and regulation. Since the report was issued, nursing professionals have initiated programs in practice, education, and research to bring the IOM recommendations to fruition. Many national and grassroots efforts have already taken shape. *Nurses and Environmental Health: Success Through Action; Illustrations From Across the Nation* presents examples of those emerging efforts.

This publication is divided into four major areas: environmental health in nursing practice; environmental health in nursing education; environmental health in nursing research; and federal initiatives in environmental health and nursing. The illustrations presented in the area of nursing practice focus on community outreach to improve public health. Through these stories we see nursing students and professionals affecting their own communities. Projects range from a "zero mercury tolerance" campaign by labor nurses to students providing environmental assessments and assistance in the aftermath of natural disasters.

The illustrations presented in the area of nursing education range from development of focused programs and extensive curricula within baccalaureate nursing programs to interactive education tools and experiential learning. The examples include projects focused on local environmental issues and at-risk populations, assessments, interdisciplinary collaboration, and environmental health advocacy.

Nursing research in environmental health is a growing area of interest and importance. The examples presented in this publication encompass community surveys of environmental health awareness; examination of the environmental exposures of housekeepers, janitors, and building custodians; and environmental factors impacting high-risk populations.

The illustrations presented in the area of federal initiatives include training for community-based education; electronic forums; continuing education curricula and conferences; and development of regulations and standards for nursing practice. These programs incorporate alliances with nonprofit and professional organizations nationwide through which environmental efforts are extended.

Individually, nurses' stories present creative steps for revitalizing the environment as one of the major domains within the scope of nursing education, practice, and research. These stories illustrate the cross-functional types of initiatives that are increasing the capacity of nurses to address environmental impacts on human health.



**PROVIDING ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CARE FOR MIGRANT WORKERS
AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING FOR HISPANIC YOUTH**

*Migrant Clinicians Network
Austin, Texas*

The Migrant Clinicians Network (MCN) is leading initiatives and partnering with other organizations and government agencies to bring about positive change in the way health care providers, particularly nursing professionals, address environmental health issues in their practice settings and communities.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) invested in MCN's efforts to improve the environmental health capacity of health care providers who see migrant and seasonal farm workers as patients. This effort involved the development and implementation of a comprehensive environmental health education program for all levels of professional migrant health care providers. An extensive needs assessment is under way. When completed, it will map and prioritize environmental health needs for migrant farm workers geographically by region. It will also identify environmental health education needs specific to each kind of health care professional (i.e., physicians vs. outreach workers vs. midwives vs. nurses) and will identify the best educational sources specific to each topic and professional group.

MCN worked in partnership with the Medical Hispanic Center of Excellence to prepare Hispanic youth from South Texas to enter schools of higher education, including institutions geared to medical professions and allied health professions. A summer intensive program at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center in San Antonio is dedicated to this objective, followed by a year-long project in a health or allied health area. The program places Hispanic youth in

internship and shadowing positions. Through support from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), MCN worked with students recruited for the South Texas/Border Partnership for participation in a year-long occupational health and safety project.

MCN works with NIOSH (page 45) in an effort to assess what adolescent migrant farm workers know about agriculture's occupational risks. A series of focus groups were convened to understand more about the risks they face and their work habits, tasks, and safety knowledge. Evaluation results will guide safety and health professionals in formulating recommendations about age-appropriate agricultural work tasks and the development of appropriate safety and health training materials and methods.

Rutgers University, Texas A&M University, and MCN are leading another project that focuses on children and pesticide exposure in an agricultural community on the U.S./Mexico border. The research study is examining how children become exposed to pesticides and how their activities might influence their exposure risks.

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