

## Rebuilding the Bridge

Health and the environment are major nursing concerns.

### **What is environmental health, and is it important for all nurses?**

Since Florence Nightingale first spoke about the influence of clean air and water on health, the environment has been an integral part of nursing. However, in the last half century, it often has been undervalued and largely overlooked. Medical–surgical developments since World War II overshadowed early 20th-century public health advances in clean water, sanitation, and proper ventilation. Nurses' attention to environmental factors in health and illness waned. Now we must take a second look.

We live in a radically different world. Thousands of new chemicals have been introduced to the environment, most of which did not even exist before World War II. Lifestyles and health priorities have shifted. However, the financial and psychosocial costs of caring for people damaged by environmental contaminants are becoming too great for families and society to bear.

In 1995 the Institute of Medicine Committee on Nursing, Health and Environment identified nurses as key resources on environmental issues affecting human health. Present in every health care setting, nurses can reduce risks and rates of exposure and can join others in keeping new hazards from entering the landscape.

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH?**

*Environment* refers to the elements of everyday life—air, water,

*Marjorie Buchanan is an environmental health consultant with the ANA.*

food, clothing, hygiene and beauty products, the buildings in which we live and work, social networks of which we are a part, and more. New synthetic chemicals, farming practices, building design and construction, community development, and much more contribute to the environmental features of our individual, family, and community lives.

*Environmental health* refers to the theory and practice of assessing, correcting, controlling, and preventing those factors in the environment that can adversely affect the health of present and future generations.

### **HOW CAN NURSES RECONNECT HEALTH WITH ENVIRONMENT?**

Focusing on several key elements can help guide nurses' thinking about environmental health in nursing practice.

**Risk.** This term is at the heart of environmental health. Risk is the probability of an undesirable health outcome arising from exposure to a hazard. It involves knowledge of hazardous substances or situations and assessment of exposure.

#### **Science and precaution.**

Environmental hazards may be biological, chemical, physical, social, or psychological. While much is known about some hazards, little is known about others. Environmental scientists, health professionals, and ethicists developed the Precautionary Principle in 1998, stating that “when an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.” In 2004

the ANA adopted the Precautionary Principle.

#### **People and everyday life.**

Exposure to environmental hazards occurs where people live, work, play, and learn. Nurses can begin by including an environmental exposure history in all health assessments. The iPrepare guidelines provide key questions to include (see below).

#### **A multidisciplinary enterprise.**

Nurses in hospital, clinic, school, primary care, occupational health, rehabilitation, and other settings witness the consequences of hazardous environmental exposures. For nurses to become competent environmental health practitioners and advocates, we must establish relationships with new colleagues, such as engineers, environmental scientists, toxicologists, chemists, epidemiologists, city planners, and others who provide complementary professional skills.

### **HOW CAN NURSES LEARN MORE?**

- The ANA RN No Harm Training and Pollution Prevention Kit for Nurses ([www.nursingworld.org](http://www.nursingworld.org))
- Precautionary Principle
- University of Maryland School of Nursing's Environmental Health Education Center ([www.enviRN.umaryland.edu](http://www.enviRN.umaryland.edu))
- Health Care Without Harm and the Nurses Work Group ([www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org))
- Collaborative for Health and the Environment ([www.cheforhealth.org](http://www.cheforhealth.org))
- ATSDR: I Prepare ([www.atsdr.cdc.gov](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov)) ▼