

How nurses working in primary health care improve health outcomes

Primary health care nurses are registered nurses with knowledge and expertise in primary health care practice. Primary health care nurses work in a range of primary health care settings including schools, general practice, communities, prisons, industry, homes, and hospitals.

Primary health care nurses have a complex role providing nursing interventions to promote, improve, maintain and restore health. Growing evidence exists across all settings demonstrating the wide ranging impact primary health care nurses have on improving health outcomes.

Examples

Pilot study: Practice nurses and diabetes specialist nurses offering outreach services to people diagnosed with diabetes resulted in improved glycaemic control and lipid management and a reduction in hospital admissions (Smythe & Williamson, 2010).

RCT: Practice nurses providing motivational counselling for people experiencing lower back pain as part of an interdisciplinary clinical guideline improved functional capacity and a decrease in days in pain for people in the programme (Becker, et al., 2008).

Controlled study: Practice nurses providing education and counselling to people with COPD in combination with a COPD support service increased lung function measurement, improved long term inhaler use, and decreased the requirement for emergency medication (Meulepas, et al., 2007).

Systematic review: Appropriately trained nurses produce as high quality care and achieve as good health outcomes for people in primary care as doctors and in addition, nurses achieve higher levels of patient satisfaction than doctors (Laurant, et al., 2004).

Pilot study: School nurses providing support for obese children and their families significantly reduced mean BMI and achieved high parental satisfaction with the programme (Melin & Lenner, 2009).

Prospective cohort: Nurses providing prolonged nurse consultations in a PHO chronic care management programme that was free to patients, used formal written wellness plans, who were formally trained to support patient self management, and shared governance with Māori reduced HbA1C to equivalent levels of non- Māori and decreased LDLs and systolic blood pressure for both Māori and non- Māori (Kenealy, et al., 2010).

RCT: Nurses undertaking intensive home visiting (up to 26 home visits in the first two years of life) results in a range of beneficial child health outcomes including children more likely to be enrolled in pre-school education, higher intellectual functioning and vocabulary scores, and fewer behavioural problems (Olds, et al., 2004a; 2004b). These effects were apparent up to twelve years beyond the end of the nurse visits, were evident in children from a range of

social and ethnic backgrounds although the effects were stronger amongst children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, improved maternal life course, and reduced government spending among children through 12 year (Olds, et al., 2004a; 2004b; 2010; Kitzman, et al., 2010).

Case Study

Rodney is 14 years old and weighs 127kg. He first visited his school nurse after he started skipping school as a result of bullying from his peers and his teacher recommended a visit. Rodney's school nurse has linked Rodney in with the aerobics programme at his local church and has started Rodney and his family on a supported programme to address his obesity issues. This includes dietary advice, motivational counseling, monitoring and referral as needed. So far, Rodney has lost 10kg and he and his family are attending regular exercise sessions at their church. Rodney is back attending school every day and is proud that both he and his family are feeling fitter and healthier every day.

Qualitative research supports Rodney's experiences, suggesting that care provided by a nurse results in increased independence, increased autonomy and feelings of freedom (Edwall et al., 2008).

Summary

Increasing evidence demonstrates how primary health care nurses improve health outcomes. The evidence supports primary health care nurses undertaking interventions both as part of a collaborative team and autonomously. Primary health care nurses are key to improving health outcomes in a range of primary health care settings and must be utilised accordingly.

All literature referred to in this fact sheet is available from the NZNO library:
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Mission statement

NZNO is committed to the representation of members and the promotion of nursing and midwifery. NZNO embraces Te Tiriti o Waitangi and works to improve the health status of all peoples of Aotearoa/ New Zealand through participation in health and social policy development.

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