

# Strengthening public health nursing education

**How strong is the public health content in the curricula of New Zealand nursing schools? A recent review of all 17 nursing schools has provided some useful information.**

By Karen Monahan and NZNO nursing policy adviser Jill Clendon

Public health nursing has long been established as a subspecialty of community nursing in New Zealand. Changes in the status and work of public health nurses (PHNs) has seen a growing call within public health nursing to develop an education framework that will both attract, and help retain, nurses in the specialty. An outcome from the development of an initial framework was a call to increase public health curriculum content in schools of nursing.<sup>1</sup> We decided to undertake a review of the existing public health content of undergraduate curricula to inform development of the PHN education framework.

We used the definitions of public and population health used by the Public Health Nursing Education Framework Working Group and Public Health Association to guide our analysis.<sup>1</sup> Public health is described as “*the science and art of promoting health, preventing disease and prolonging life through the organised efforts of society*”.<sup>1</sup> Public health work focuses on improving the overall health of populations, such as children, through interventions such as immunisation, health screening checks or safer housing. Population health focuses on the health outcomes or status of populations, such as groups, families and communities. A population health approach takes account of all the influences on health, and how they can be tackled to reduce inequalities and improve the overall health of the population.

We wanted to review all 17 New Zealand undergraduate curricula, so, after gaining ethical approval from the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, we worked with Nurse Educators in the Tertiary Sector to recruit schools of nursing. Not all nursing schools were interested in forwarding information about the public and population health content of their programmes to us.

In the end, information from all 17 institutes was obtained. Nine provided the information directly, with information from the remaining eight obtained from website information. We collated all the information into a table and compared it with our definitions of public and population health to

determine just how much content there was on these topics.

Despite concerns from PHNs, content related to public and population health content in undergraduate curricula is comprehensive. The area that appears limited is epidemiology and environmental microbiology. This area is considered particularly useful in disease tracing and monitoring,<sup>3</sup> a practice area of many PHNs.

The documents reviewed included numerous references to primary health care (PHC). Promoting health is mentioned several times and at several different levels. In the course descriptors, this is often linked with wellness promotion, education, health education principles, frameworks and healthy lifestyles – core elements of public health.

Disease is mentioned in six course descriptors or content, and two others mention communicable and infectious diseases. The words “prolonging life” are not used but this is insinuated in various other ways. For example, health education, health promotion and healthy living are frequently included and all contribute to prolonging life. The majority of courses mention this in some manner.

The determinants of health are well covered in all courses. International, national and local politics are included in the majority of courses reviewed and at differing levels of content. Models of health care and the role of the nurse are also included.

## Primary health care issues

At level 7 (year three), several courses critically analyse issues related to PHC, influences and impact of care. This is intended to help students review policies and their impact on individuals, families/whānau and communities. The structure of PHC is discussed at different levels. Students do need to understand the structure of the PHC sector and how this influences health but, more importantly, how this will continue to change as the government increases its focus and puts more money towards PHC. It may be helpful to teach the structure

of PHC earlier in the curricula.

Both public and population health content overlap throughout the curricula and the extent to which both are taught is encouraging. The broad depth of knowledge expected of students should work to improve public and population health.

## Taking part in the review

Some schools were reluctant to take part in the review. A good understanding of curriculum content enables workforce planners and organisations to undertake effective workforce planning. One of the recommendations of the PHN framework working group was to encourage nursing schools to review their curricula content in relation to public and population health, and introduce new or additional competencies. Our findings suggest such a review is likely to be unnecessary. However, a lack of engagement from the schools was concerning.

Small, simple studies like this can address assumptions, provide evidence for undertaking or, in some cases, not undertaking further work, and provide background information on areas of interest. We were able to recommend the working group took steps to encourage schools of nursing to increase curricula content in epidemiology and environmental microbiology, continue their open engagement with schools of nursing to ensure public health remains a priority, and consider a review of postgraduate nursing curricula as the next step. We did not see a full curriculum review as necessary.

There may be further, related material about public and population health threaded throughout undergraduate nursing curricula in other papers/courses – particularly at those institutes that did not share information with us. For this reason, the findings from this review should not be considered definitive, but can be seen as informative. •

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## References

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