A day in the Life of a Public Health Nurse

My name is Catherine Hanley and I have been working as a PHN in Deansrath Health Centre for the past three years. Previous to that I worked in Ballyfermot Health Centre, following successful completion of the Higher Diploma in Public Health Nursing.

Deansrath Health Centre is based in an urban setting and has a mixed social environment. The area is partly considered ‘disadvantaged’ and many compounding problems abound such as drug and alcohol dependency, poverty, and broken relationships. The advantage however, is that there are more local supports in the area such as the ‘early start’ programme for pre school children and crèches are more affordable in this location.

The Health Centre is in a designated Primary Care setting. The Nursing team is comprised of two full-time Public Health Nurses, 2 part-time Public Health Nurses, two job-sharing Registered General Nurses and a Health Care Assistant. Our Health Centre meets the needs of a full spectrum of the population including families and children, persons aged over 65 years, physically, sensory and intellectually disabled persons under 65 years, plus all other persons less than 65 years. The Public Health Nurse tends to focus largely on the child and family caseload while clinical nursing is central to the work of the Registered General Nurses. Nursing staff can make referrals to other members of the Primary Care Team when required.

The Public Health Nurses run both a ‘drop in’ clinic for parents and children, and a breastfeeding support group once a week. There is a clinic every morning for nursing procedures such as dressings and injection administration. Home visits are also undertaken for clinical nursing and palliative care. Much of the child development screening is now carried out on an appointment basis in the health centre. We tend to run the clinics at times that are suited to the parents and as a result the attendance is generally very good. The Public Health Nurse assists with BCG vaccinations when required, and performs vision screening in the local schools. Health promotion and education is carried out on an ongoing basis with individuals, and periodically in group settings such as the school.

There are other resources available in the Health Centre which offers great support to our service, especially where there are concerns in relation to child development or social issues. The Speech Therapist runs an advisory clinic. The Community Welfare Officer can provide a font of wisdom. The adjacent Family Centre runs the ‘Incredible Years’ parenting programme and a complementary programme for children of the parents which teaches them social skills such as sharing, through the use of puppets.

Our service also focuses on developing new initiatives. For instance, we identified many Polish mothers in the area who did not speak English or had little English and were unaware of other Polish mothers living in the area. Our Public Health Nursing service organised a number of Polish coffee mornings, which were very successful. Also, as a consequence, two of the Polish mothers are now working with the Public Health Nurse family development co-ordinator, as a ‘community mother’ supporting and aiding new Polish mothers in the area.

As Public Health Nurses normally work alone, teambuilding, networking and open communication with nursing colleagues and the multidisciplinary Primary Care Team is essential. There is a strong team ethos in this health centre, and we often exchange information, give and receive support and advice over a cup of tea, or more formally at the Primary Care Meetings, where complex cases are discussed with the relevant disciplines involved such as nursing, occupational health, physiotherapy, GP and social work.

A day in the life of a Public Health Nurse offers continued variety. Like all jobs, it has its stressful moments, but the work is always interesting and full of diversity - there is never a dull moment as each day brings new and challenging situations.

Are you ready to join me in this exciting career?

Regards

Catherine Hanley
Q&A with Catherine Hanley

How did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in Public Health Nursing?

During my community placement as a student Nurse, I found that nursing people in their own environment, as opposed to a hospital environment a very satisfying experience; both for patients and Nurses. It was at this stage that the seed was sown to pursue a career in Public Health Nursing.

How did you pursue a career in Public Health Nursing?

I planned my career around the requirements for Public Health Nursing for example Paediatrics, Midwifery and experience in Care of the Elderly. None of this is mandatory but is very helpful. I also obtained invaluable information about the PHN role from talking to colleagues who were PHNs and from the HSE and An Bord Altranais web sites.

I responded to the recruitment advertisement and following an interview was accepted for the Higher Diploma in PHN course in UCD which is sponsored by the HSE.

How did you find the Higher Diploma in PHN?

It was very challenging and interesting. I loved being a student. It was the first time in my nursing career that I had the time to reflect on practice while learning. The course is a Higher Diploma and therefore academically challenging but very relevant to the role. As part of the course I carried out a profile of an area, highlighting the needs of the area and identifying the services available to meet those needs. This profile also identified the gaps in the services within the community – this is an aspect of the PHN role that we review and try to fill the gaps either by developing some services or by networking with other community groups who may address these issues. Examples of the development of services are the breast feeding support groups and the Polish Mothers group.

How does your job allow you to have a lifestyle that you are happy with?

The security of a permanent job gives me great peace of mind. My current contract allows me to have time for my family and other interests. The sociable hours means that I can plan ahead in my private life.

What are your favourite aspects of the job/ the things that you like doing most?

I enjoy meeting my clients in their home setting. In hospital, patients are often fearful and apprehensive. I also get to know the extended family and am in a better position to treat my patients holistically.

As an autonomous practitioner, I have scope within my practice to be innovative in meeting the identified needs of clients on my caseload e.g. set up a breastfeeding support clinic, facilitate networking and support an aspect of fractionised groups (e.g. non - English speaking clients) organise and run parenting courses etc. I like the diversity of the job, whether it is giving advice and support to a new mother, or liaising with relatives or with the wider multidisciplinary team in organising a plan of care which will enable an older person to remain independently in his/ her home.

What are the least attractive aspects of your job?

The paper work involved in carrying out my role - although essential I am not as enthusiastic about doing it as I am about the practical work! Sometimes wet weather can be a bit off putting when carrying out home visits. However, the fine days more than make up for this.
Describe a typical day?

It can vary but would usually include some or all of the following:

- Plan and prioritise the day’s workload
- Meet with Health Centre Nursing team to plan visits.
- Call to homes to carry out early scheduled patient care
- Make home visits to newborn infants, carry out neonatal screening, follow up on hospital referrals and other scheduled visits
- On return to health centre, respond to e-mails and phone messages
- Manage the wound care clinic / participate in child health screening clinic / breast feeding support clinic / Polish morning / school vision screening / deliver school health promotional talk
- Attend a meeting with the Primary Health Care Team to discuss joint management of clients with complex care needs
- Attend to clerical work

Have you undertaken or do you plan to undertake any further training as part of your job?

I have undertaken a teaching and assessment course for Nurses - a module of the degree course - which will aid me in my role as preceptor to PHNs. I partake in the continuous in-service training provided to help keep us up skilled. Occasionally I am released from my duties to attend conferences / courses relevant to my work. I am a trainer for my colleagues in use of the Post Natal Depression Assessment Tool and I have trained as a facilitator and plan to set up a Post Natal support group.

What are your current aspirations from here?

I would be interested in the post of Clinical Placement Co-ordinator in the Community or Community Professional Developmental Officer. I may also consider doing a Master’s Degree in the area of Child Health / Child Care.