Community Health Nursing and the Mentally Ill

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Abstract

This paper examines the importance of community-focused and community-based nursing when caring for the mentally ill. A community-focused mental health nurse has the opportunity to establish screening programs to identify the mentally ill population within a community and to establish procedures or protocols for meeting the needs of the mentally ill. The community-based nurse will then implement the procedure or protocols to ensure the health of the mentally ill individuals within the community. Though the roles of the community-based and the community-focused nurse are different they are both necessary for the overall health of the community.
The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast community-based nursing and community-focused nursing as it relates to the mentally ill. “Historically, public health was synonymous with nursing in the community. Public health and, later, community health nursing were distinguished by attention to aggregates, prevention, and protection” (Nehls & Vandermause). According to Maurer and Smith (2009) a community-focused nurse directs care on the health of the population whereas the community-based nurse focuses care on the individual or family. Both the community-based nurse and the community-focused nurse are important to the overall health of the individual mental health client and the overall mental health population.

To begin with it is important to understand the need for community-focused and community-based nursing among the mentally ill. “Estimates of the prevalence of mental illness consistently show that approximately half of all homeless individuals have had mental illness at some time in their lives” (Joyce & Limbos, 2009). According to Joyce and Limbos when the mentally ill are left on the streets untreated for their mental and physical illnesses it places them at an increased risk of moderate to severe disabilities. These disabilities can make it very difficult for the mentally ill homeless to access needed community health care services. The homeless are part of the overall aggregate or population within a community. There “By improving the health of aggregates, the health of families, and individuals is improved” (Feenstra, 2000, p. 156). Therefore, it is important that the focus of care not only be on the mental health community as a whole but also on the individual needs of the mentally ill within the community.

This is best exemplified by the local community mental health (CMH) programs found established within communities to meet the needs of the mentally ill population. As a
community-focused organization CMH programs offer psychiatric evaluations with medication reviews, psychotherapy, case management, and nursing care. CMH programs are meant to offer affordable mental health service to the community in order to help the mentally ill in the community live a healthy independent life. Many of these individuals have little to no insurance to cover the expenses of mental health treatment, and without CMH care might find them homeless (Joyce & Limbos, 2009). However, with proper treatment the mentally ill can be a valuable asset to the community.

The nurse’s role in a community-focused mental health facility includes nursing assessments, education regarding medications and mental illness, medication set ups, and relapse prevention. The nurse works directly with the psychiatrist, social worker, psychologist, and primary care physicians to provide well rounded health care for the mentally ill. The mental health nurse will work to establish programs within the community to assist the mentally ill which includes programs to help identify those at risk for mental illness. These programs could include screening clinics and surveys to identify the needs for the community, and education of the community in relation to mental illness. A good example of this would be a school nurse. A school nurse is already actively involved within a community, as she screens children and adolescents for physical health issues she can also screen for mental illness and recommend proper treatment for those at risk individual.

When looking at the community-based mental health care within a community mental health program one would look at the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) nurse. The ACT nurse works directly with the mentally ill patients in the community (Joyce & Limbos, 2009). The nurse will do medication drops on a daily or weekly basis, help a client grocery shop, pay bills, and get to mental and physical health appointments. The ACT nurse helps not only the
client but the client’s family in recognizing the need for treatment, support, and relapse symptoms. The ACT nurse insures that the chronically mentally ill patient receives the support necessary to maintain overall health and viability within the community.

Therefore it is important to recognize the role of the community-focused mental health nurse and the community-based mental health nurse. The community-focused mental health nurse establishes criteria for evaluating and assessing the needs of mental health care of an aggregate or population. The community-based mental health nurse, ACT nurse, focuses on implementing and providing the direct care within the aggregate or community. While they have different roles within the community they are both necessary for the overall well being of the individual and the community at large.
References


