RCN Policy and International
RCN Nursing Department
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Public Health
RCN Position Statement

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Introduction

A key strand in public health is the lifestyle choices made by individuals. The impact of choices made by individuals may extend beyond themselves to affect their children, their families, their employers and the wider community that they come into contact with. Individual choices will, on a collective basis, have ramifications for society as a whole.

The RCN takes a balanced approach between individual, societal/cultural, legal and regulatory policy measures to be an effective voice for the profession in the delicate interplay of rights and responsibilities of individuals, government and industry.

The RCN agrees that we must support the population to make healthier choices. Disease prevention is underpinned by the principle that individuals should be empowered with accurate information to help them understand the impact that lifestyle has on their health. More can be done to improve the lived environment so that people find it easier to make healthier choices however, the 'nudge' approach alone in the absence of regulation may have only limited success.

Whilst we support the principle of engaging with industry to behave in a socially responsible way and recognise that voluntary commitments to living better can work, we believe that sometimes the interests of industry and the interests of population health simply do not align. People often need support to make better choices about how they live and the RCN has suggested that a firm approach should be taken with industry with the 'stick' of regulation to be used where necessary.

The RCN believes that in some circumstances action from national government is the most appropriate way in which to protect and promote public health, for example, mandating the inclusion of accurate information and appropriate advice on the labelling of tobacco, alcohol and food products; drawing up a clear transport policy to reduce air and noise pollution and encourage the adoption of active forms of transport (walking, cycling etc); working harder to make breast feeding friendly spaces the norm and increasing provision of and access to green spaces which are proven to benefit mental health and wellbeing.

Importance of prevention

The UK is dealing with the impact of the global economic recession and a reduction in public spending. It is important that health promotion is now a high priority and that we act decisively to relieve the burden of unhealthy lifestyles on our health service and society.

There is a cost benefit to early interventions; however, tight budgets often mean activity is focussed on short term areas of acute need rather than prevention work which would be of

greater benefit in the long term. The RCN has called for more emphasis on 'up-stream' primary prevention activity to be embedded within the public health and health system.

The King's Fund notes that "primary prevention is an excellent use of resources when compared with many treatment and curative interventions. Of more than 250 studies on prevention published in 2008, almost half showed a cost of under £6,400 per quality-adjusted life year (QALY) and almost 80 per cent cost less than £30,000 per QALY, the cut-off used by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) for cost-effectiveness (van Gils *et al* 2010)."[1]

Role of nurses

Regardless of the environments nurses work in or their titles or individual roles, all nurses have a part to play in improving the health of local people. In every context and at every level, nursing staff carry out public health activities. They may work in public health departments as a public health consultant or Director of Public Health, they may have a public health clinical role – such as specialist alcohol nurse, sexual health, occupational health or travel health nurse or health visitor – or they may deliver public health messages as part of everyday care provision or at 'teachable moments' (when patients are more open to public health messages in light of their present health condition).

It is important for nurses to build supportive relationships with patients and to make every contact count. Nurses need the skills to have the difficult conversation with patients about their lifestyle and to use their professional judgement as to which clinical situations are appropriate for these conversations.

Nurses often work to prevent ill health before it happens by addressing lifestyle choices in a fashion which make people feel supported to make healthier changes. However, if an individual chooses not to change unhealthy behaviours then the ethos of the NHS ensures that they will be treated in a non-judgemental way for any illness that ensues.

Tobacco and Alcohol

We have regarded tobacco as a special case because of the immediate health harm to the smoker and others around them with no additional health benefits. We would be entirely unwilling to engage with the tobacco industry and have encouraged tighter control of tobacco products to reduce the prevalence of smokers wherever possible.

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[1]

http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/current_projects/gp_commissioning/ten_priorities_for_commissioners/primary_prevention.htmlhttp://www.kingsfund.org.uk/current_projects/gp_commissioning/ten_priorities_for_commissioners/primary_prevention.html

For example, in an announcement to launch the RCN's membership of the Plain Packs Protect Campaign, Dr Peter Carter said:

"The RCN has consistently campaigned for initiatives to reduce the number of people who smoke. However, smoking remains the major cause of premature death and disease killing over 100,000 people each year. Crucially, we now need more robust ideas to stop young people smoking in the first place, such as clamping down on the use of tobacco packaging as advertising. This is why we support the campaign for plain standardised packaging."

http://www.rcn.org.uk/development/communities/rcn_forum_communities/public_health

However, moderate alcohol consumption is generally considered to be a socially acceptable part of British culture. The RCN alcohol policy has been focussed on 'alcohol misuse' and 'excessive consumption' and to call for harm reduction and greater awareness, not the elimination of alcohol products.[2]

For example, in a Guardian comment piece from 2010, Dr Peter Carter said:

"There needs to be a *cultural shift towards safer drinking*, especially among younger people, to help the NHS and to improve the health of the nation."

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/08/alcohol-abuse-nhs-resources

Contributory social factors

The RCN has also commented on a wider range of contributory social factors that influence directly or indirectly the health of the population such as: social and economic inequality and the importance of a good standard of living for all[3]; poverty and the proposed changes to welfare benefits including cuts to housing benefit and incapacity benefit; the importance of social capital and resilient communities; and the connection between bad housing, fuel poverty and poor health.

Whilst these may be beyond the direct remit of the nursing role, nurses will certainly see the evidence and deal with the consequences of poor public health arising from these contributory social factors and the RCN is keen to work with others to reduce the occurrences of avoidable poor health.

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[2] RCN Alcohol: policies to reduce alcohol-related harm in England, 2012

[3] http://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/438838/01.12_Health_inequalities_and_the_social_determinants_of_health.pdf

Relevant RCN public health policy work

Alcohol: policies to reduce alcohol-related harm in England – RCN briefing
http://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/438368/05.12_Alcohol_Short_Briefing_Feb2012.pdf

Packaging of tobacco products – RCN response
http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/consultations/responses/standardised_packaging_of_tobacco_products

Front of pack nutrition labelling – Joint professions response
http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/consultations/responses/front_of_pack_nutrition_labelling

Health inequalities and the social determinants of health – RCN briefing
http://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/438838/01.12_Health_inequalities_and_the_social_determinants_of_health.pdf

Public Health funding – RCN response
http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/consultations/responses/healthy_lives,_healthy_people_update_on_public_health_funding

Public Health workforce strategy – RCN response
http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/consultations/responses/healthy_lives,_healthy_people_towards_a_workforce_strategy_for_the_public_health_system

Going upstream: nursing's contribution to public health – RCN document

http://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/433699/004203.pdf

Healthy Lives; Healthy People – RCN response
http://www.rcn.org.uk/support/consultations/responses/public_health_white_paper_healthy_lives,_healthy_people
Including:
- Public Health White Paper
- Funding and commissioning routes
- Public Health outcomes framework