

The lived experiences and values of environmentally engaged nurses

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Nursing and Environmental Health

Protecting the environment for the health of present and future generations is no longer just the role of the eco-warrior but a small and growing number of primary care, public/community health, occupational health nurses

The role of nurses who practice environmental health (EH) appears to be more established in the US than in the UK but in recent years, more nurses have started specializing in the field.

This presentation reports on a study exploring the lived experience and values of nurses in the USA and UK who incorporated environmental health, advocacy and sustainability into their practice

What is Environmental Health

- Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours.
- It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health.
- It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments.

http://www.searo.who.int/topics/environmental_health/en



Study Design

- ▶ Mixed methods
 - ▶ Document analysis (Environmental health reports, module guides, other documents)
 - ▶ Focus groups
 - ▶ Individual interviews (face to face, telephone, Skype)
 - ▶ Site visit observations
- ▶ Data analysis
 - ▶ Discourse analysis for documents
 - ▶ Gadamerian phenomenological analysis for focus groups and interviews with additional discourse analysis being applied to stories that are told.
- ▶ Reflective diary maintained by the lead researcher capturing insights, anomalies and points to explore for in-depth Gadamerian immersion

Sample

- Purposive sampling was employed
- All participants were RNs actively engaged in environmental health issues
- Employment of the participants included hospital or community health practice, private practice and academia
- Some nurses in the US obtained grants to carry out health related projects in vulnerable populations
- Environmental interests included climate change, toxic chemical reduction and waste management



Sample

- 10 RNs participated in (2) focus groups in the US
- 6 RNs participated in (2) focus groups in the UK
- 12 individual interviews were carried out with participants in America
- 10 individual interviews were carried out with participants in the UK
- 1 UK OHN and 1 UK OHEN observed in depth
- Experiences covered at least 12 States and the 3 mainland countries of the UK
- Ethical Approval was granted by London South Bank University and the University of Washington

Findings

Three key findings related to:

1. The **Awakening** of their interest in environmental health
2. Taking **Action**
3. The **Ethical Values** that inspire and sustain their action





Awakening

- ▶ Some nurses became environmentally engaged because they were given a role by their employer
 - ▶ “I was asked by the Dean of our faculty to take on the Faculty Lead role for sustainability. At which point, my eyes rolled and I thought, another thing, another tick box that we have to do...I didn't really understand what she meant by sustainability...but once I started engaging I started to understand the relevance to the course and what sustainable health care actually meant”
- ▶ Others recounted tragic stories that made them start to think about the impact of the environment upon health.
- ▶ Talking about facilitating the ‘lightbulb’ moment with nursing students



Action

- ▶ Moving from awakening to action was a natural step for our participants
- ▶ Common threads for advocacy included:
 - ▶ Environmentally engaged in a variety of issues but all emphasized the need to not stretch themselves too thin. Shared areas of focus include:
 - ▶ Environmental triggers for asthma
 - ▶ Waste stream management
 - ▶ Toxic chemical reduction
 - ▶ Climate change
 - ▶ Unique to the US- was the focus on methylmercury.


Actions - Some of the ways participants have had environmental impact

- Successfully campaigning to have disposable diapers removed from hospitals and new mother packs
- Clean rivers (cleaning, monitoring contaminant levels in water and fish)
- Clean Air campaigning, monitoring particulate levels and educating on asthma risks
- Testifying to the legislature as nurses about environmental harms and environmental health issues
- Monitoring workplace environments for biological, chemical, radiological and environmental hazards and taking action to prevent harm
- Campaigning against nuclear weapons and leaking waste from nuclear plants
- Applying for grants to run community projects e.g. testing the homes of low income parents for lead and other toxins (e.g. lead found in blinds made in countries like China)
- Finding opportunities and solutions to address social injustices and reduce mortality and morbidity discrepancies
- Use tap water not bottled water
- ***Lobbying to get nursing associations like the Royal College of Nursing, the American Nurses Association and Nursing and Midwifery Council to incorporate EH into their remit and their expectations of nurses***

Taking Action

- Speaking out - Nurses believed it was their duty to speak out since even seemingly-diehard disbelievers opinions can change
- Tailoring the message to the audience is important
- ...And it's all about the money
 - “As soon as you go away from it being about money, you're cooked really.” UK-15)
- Sticking your head above the parapet
 - Taking action means being visible
 - Resilience






Finding the
right
employer
helps nurses
lead change
– several
encountered
hostility

➤ Organizational fit

“The values that our company has of integrity, excellence, stewardship...those are all values that I believe motivate me to be an environmental health advocate. Stewardship is huge! It doesn't just mean money, right, and having integrity, I just want to say that I think we are all fighting from the same values.” (US-FG3)



Hospitals are healing communities

Hospitals can tackle food insecurity, obesity, and chronic disease while promoting healthy, local, and sustainable food systems.

Ethical Values

- Several participants had to think hard about the values that underpinned the inclusion of caring for the planet as part of their nursing role.
- In contrast, one participant was very clear that three values guide her practice and why caring for the environment is necessary:

“There are three ethical values that guide me. First of all is ‘**do no harm**’ and so anything we do, should not harm the patient and that includes leaving the patient feeling good about themselves.”

Her second value was “**self-efficacy**, decisions belong to the patient and I have to support them to be able to make their own decisions, the choices are theirs” and she added that “I have to leave people feeling positive, that they can do something about their situation.”

Her third value was “my role is, I have to **alleviate suffering**.” (US-14)

Ethics – Social Justice and Fairness

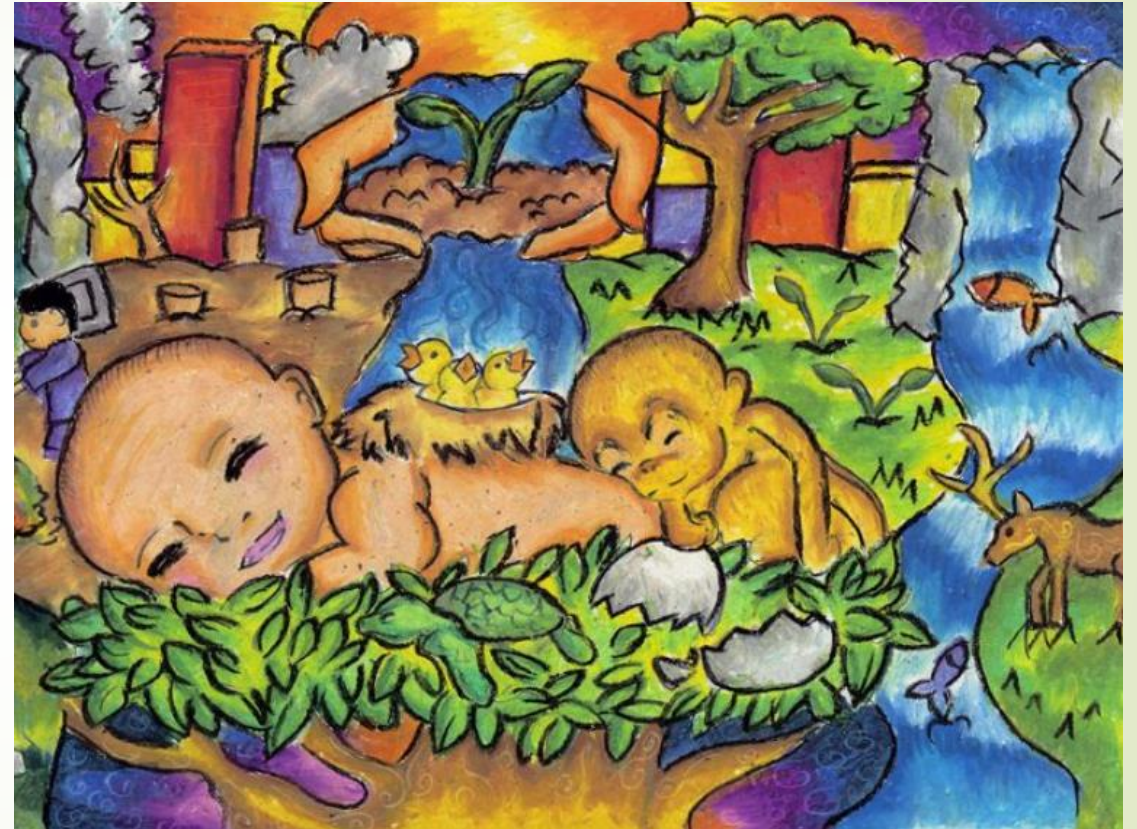
- **Social justice** was almost exclusively used by US nurses.

“I think social justice and environmental justice. You know, it’s always the poor, it’s always the marginalised, it’s always the powerless...we have, in [State] seven different reservations and we have marginalised populations among our American Indian populations that...have the same risk factors in terms of socio-economic status and historical abuse and powerlessness...”

- Addressing social justice issues was seen as a way of helping people thrive
- One UK nurse characterized social justice as “social justice warriors” – in a pejorative sense
- **Fairness** is part of social justice and this was a term UK participants were more comfortable to use.

Ethics: Generational Unfairness

- ▶ “...not being so selfish that we damage that for future generations. I fear for people who've got children, young children, and I look at my friends and I think, what kind of world are we bringing these children into...although there are many positive things are happening at the moment, it all might be, too little, too late.” (UK-16)





Advocacy

“...our nursing code of ethics, I think we are pretty similar globally as nurses, but...our role of advocacy is one of the most important things that we do...we have to advocate for populations of people in the same way we would advocate for individuals...for me it's an ethical obligation, I have to advocate for populations of people which I consider, you know, myself to be in a nursing role.”

Invoking the Precautionary Principle

- ▶ UK participants rarely mentioned the precautionary principle in contrast to their US counterparts
- ▶ One US participant suggested the Precautionary principle was falling out of favor as a way of mobilizing action




The Trump Effect

- ▶ One participant believed Trump was actually playing a clever game with his shock politics. While people were talking about the latest thing he had said, behind the scenes, she alleged, he was helping “Corporate America” undo legislative environmental protections
- ▶ Another felt the Trump effect was moving people off the fence





Concluding reflections

- Nurses are making a real difference to people's lives and the world through their environmental engagement
 - Nurses care about people, they care about their children and grandchildren even if they do not think they particularly care about the planet
 - Therefore, nurses should start asking questions about the environment
- 



Questions for nurses to ask:

- **What about the children?** Identify how actions and inactions of people, communities, businesses and legislators affect the health of the next generation and the ones after that.
- **Are we role-modelling reduce, reuse, recycle?** Nurses can be very influential. Also, these principles can help save money for the healthcare organisations so it is a win-win situation.
- **Where are the low-hanging fruit?** Identify the small and easy steps that can be taken to make environmental (health) improvements.
- **What's upstream?** Look to see what politicians or organisations are doing or not doing and consider what might be the effects or implications. Get involved.



Taking Action

- ▶ Pick the low-hanging fruit
 - ▶ With support big EH problems can be addressed
 - ▶ As a lone person, it's critical to not take on an impossible task. Nurses need to differentiate and direct efforts toward achieving what they can.
 - ▶ Know your limits and prioritize your actions
 - ▶ Frame the message in a way that people will hear

“If you have a 200 pound log on top of a seventy pound child and a seventy pound log on top of a 200 pound man, you would try to move the seventy pound log because you can't move the 200 pound log on your own.” (US-13)



Demand to be heard!

- Nurses are one of the largest and most respected professions in the world – use this collective voice powerfully. Demand that nursing organisations lobby in support of environmental health issues.

Thank You for listening, any questions?

A lone, full-canopied green tree stands in a desolate, brown landscape filled with tree stumps. A white dove is perched on the very top of the tree. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds. The scene is a powerful metaphor for environmental loss.

**ONLY WHEN THE LAST TREE HAS DIED AND THE LAST RIVER
BEEN POISONED AND THE LAST FISH BEEN CAUGHT WILL WE
REALISE WE CANNOT EAT MONEY.**

TREE INDIAN PROVERB