



PROJECT FACT SHEET

In Their Own Words: Tapping the Wisdom and Experience of Public Health Nurses

Public Health Nurses have a unique understanding of the communities in which they work, and a strategic function as linking agents between individuals, families, and communities and a broad range of services. Their wisdom and experience can provide researchers, educators and policy-makers with a deeper understanding of primary health care at a grassroots level. PHNs act as initiators, community planners, collaborators, enablers, educators, advocates, and “champions.” Collaboration and building networks are part of their daily work. However, partly due to the incremental, contextual, and the social, economic, and political nature of public health nursing, their work is often invisible and seldom studied.

A Nova Scotia research project has addressed this gap in knowledge. A team led by Dr. Donna Meagher-Stewart and Dr. Megan Aston, both professors at the Dalhousie University School of Nursing, have examined the primary health care practices of Public Health Nurses in the context of public health restructuring in Nova Scotia.

The study, *Fostering Citizen Participation and Collaborative Practice: Tapping the Wisdom and Voices of Public Health Nurses in Nova Scotia*, was collaborative in nature. The Dalhousie University School of Nursing was joined by several partnering institutions: the University of Ottawa School of Nursing, the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre of Dalhousie University; the Population Health program of the Nova Scotia Department of Health, and three district health authorities: Capital, Cape Breton, and Guysborough.

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The researchers gathered PHNs’ narratives as their primary data source, and also interviewed public health management to get a full picture of what Meagher-Stewart describes as “life on the ground” and the organizational context of the nurses’ practice. In total, 75 Public Health Nurses and seven public health management representatives took part in 90-minute individual interviews or focus group sessions between December 2002 and April 2004. Public Health Nurses discussed a wide range of undertakings that ranged from visiting rurally isolated individuals and families, to helping young first-time mothers with breastfeeding, to pulling community organizations together for mental health program and policy development for youth.

The nurses also shared their philosophies. In the words of one: “The important thing is trust, and trust is incremental. It comes in little waves.” Said another, “What I value most is the broadness, the many pieces of my work.” Said a third, “None of us is going to solve all the problems by ourselves. It takes a community to deal with issues.”

Meagher-Stewart and Aston presented their research findings at regional, national and international conferences. In October 2004, the research team held a one-day Knowledge Sharing Forum at Dalhousie University to release study findings and to discuss them with Nova Scotia policy makers, educators, public health officials, researchers, and Public Health Nurses. Public Health Nurses’ capacity to provide programs and services is contingent upon the public, other professionals, government officials, and policy makers having a clear understanding of their scope of practice. ■

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