

President's Update

Leading the Way in Primary Health Care



I was at a meeting not long ago where it was brought to my attention that the messages out of the government around primary health care seem to be losing steam. I have wondered about this, too – I know that it is the nature of politics to “move on” in order to catch the public’s attention

in new ways – but primary health care can’t be the flavour of the month – it’s just too important to lose sight of. Furthermore, every discussion of primary health care seems to start and stop with primary (medical) care. Don’t get me wrong: primary care is really important – and I am passionate about community-based, comprehensive, person-centred primary care delivered by interdisciplinary teams...but that is NOT the same thing as primary health care!

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Primary care is one part of a community, and the place where most people first interact with the health-care system. So primary care is a place, and an opportunity

to engage people around what matters to them in terms of their health. To be sure, care for medical problems is an important service in such places – but it’s the engagement and relationship with people that really matters. If that relationship is informed by the principles of primary health care as envisioned in the Alma Ata in 1978 (http://www.who.int/publications/almaata_declaration_en.pdf), then you really do have an opportunity to influence health – and to see it in action is humbling. Primary health care in action is what I saw during a recent visit to the Boyle McCauley Health Centre.

The Boyle McCauley Health Centre (BMHC) has been serving Edmonton’s inner city population for 30 years. The very first thing I heard from the BMHC team was this: “this place arose from the community for the purpose of meeting the needs of the community” – they are proud of their community roots. They are prouder still of their philosophy around meeting need: it isn’t about following the funding, it’s about doing the right thing for their population. When they have a chance to meet an emerging need in their community, they don’t say “well, that’s not really about health.” Instead, they find a way to meet the need either directly, or in a partnership with others. They have established networks of influence and communication

across many sectors – housing, income supports, education, policing, victims services... wherever they need to link and partner to assist their clients – and can you guess where the biggest disconnect is for them in meeting their client’s needs? You guessed it: the rest of the health-care system. This is the population that few want to pay attention to or talk about. They are the homeless, the impoverished, the displaced, the addicted, the mentally ill, and often the victims of violence – in short, the truly vulnerable. The nurses I met shared stories of how their clients are treated in other parts of the health-care system – it’s as though the rest of the system doesn’t think primary health care has anything to do with them. That’s the danger of thinking that primary care and primary health care are the same thing. Primary health care isn’t “out there” somewhere... it should live, breathe and inform everything we do in health care, everywhere we do it.

Primary health care requires a major shift in focus, attitude and behaviour. It isn’t simply about rearranging the services we can provide – it’s about reorienting the whole system – and ourselves. It starts with the client/community – and requires working together to discover

what is getting in the way of being healthy. In other words, health is what the client says it is. Then, it’s working in partnership to find a way to meet the need. As one of the team members said to me: it’s never just a medical problem – in fact, that might be the thing the client is least worried about.

Primary health care and its principles are truly at the core of nursing knowledge. This is where the full scope of nursing practice meets the full scope of the human health experience. As leaders in health care, RNs have an important role to play in shifting the conversation about primary health care in the direction it needs to go. Primary health care isn’t a place, and it isn’t about health-care providers. It’s an approach that’s led by the population we serve, wherever we serve them. The team at Boyle McCauley not only shows how it can be done... they inspire all of us to remember to speak up for the vulnerable, and to continue to advocate for a primary health care approach that doesn’t leave anyone behind. RN

SHANNON SPENCELEY, PhD, RN
780.909.7058
president@nurses.ab.ca