

# Parish Nursing

By Marnie Burkhardt, RN

## From the book The Essential Parish Nurse by Deborah Patterson:

Often, a great deal of confusion arises about what a parish nurse is expected to do. A parish nurse serves a number of roles in a local congregation and neighborhood. To understand these roles, it is helpful first to note what a parish nurse is *not*:

A parish nurse is not a physician. He or she will not provide a medical diagnosis or medical treatment.

A parish nurse is not a home health-care nurse. She will not dispense medications or provide treatments prescribed by a physician.

A parish nurse is not a therapist. She or he will not do physical therapy, occupational therapy, or psychotherapy.

A parish nurse is not a clergyperson. A parish nurse does not hold a degree in theology, although many have some further education in theology or clinical pastoral education. All parish nurses come to the field with a deep spiritual commitment and some are, in fact, ordained.

The roles of a parish nurse generally include the following:

*Integrator of faith and health.* Health is not the absence of disease. Health is a holistic way of living that embraces life in its fullness, including the pursuit of a healthy spiritual life and connection to God and God's people. Often a parishioner feels a deep connection between a physical health concern and a spiritual concern. A parish nurse assists parishioners to achieve higher levels of wellness by helping them improve both their spiritual and physical health.

*Health educator.* **Health information surrounds us in this technological age. We have television, radio, the Internet, magazines, newspapers, even brochures in the grocery stores and billboards on the freeway. Interpreting this data for one's own health often requires a living, breathing health professional.**

*Health counselor.* To whom do parishioners go with health concerns? Parishioners may have already been to physicians but may not fully understand a diagnosis or options for treatment. They may have medications that have expired, or that negatively interact with other medications (of which the physician may have been unaware). They may wonder if their health concerns even warrant seeing a doctor. A parish nurse is available to discuss health concerns, emphasizing early response to small problems and encouraging healthy lifestyle changes.

*Referral advisor.* Where does a parishioner go if he or she needs a second opinion, needs to find a nursing home or home health services for a loved one, or needs to find a

counselor or other service? Parish nurses can spend a great deal of time networking and investigating the quality of service providers in many different arenas of health care. A parish nurse in a congregation can help provide referrals to health-care and social services within a community upon request from a parishioner.

*Health advocate.* Far too often, needed services are not available to an individual or even to large numbers of people in a given area. I remember the struggle to get sex education in the Atascadero schools. A parish nurse helps members of the congregation or community obtain needed health-related services.

*Developer of support groups.* A community often has needs for support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, a grief support group, a weight loss support group, or a cancer survivors support group. A parish nurse is often familiar with the best programs and speakers in many of these areas. A parish nurse facilitates the development of support groups for the faith community and others served.

*Volunteer coordinator.* Many of the health-related needs of a congregational member, such as transportation to the doctor or other medical appointments, for food during convalescence, or for child care during an illness, can be provided through volunteers. A parish nurse may recruit, prepare and oversee congregational volunteers who help those in need.

Of course, an individual parish nurse's gifts and interests will influence where she or he is primarily drawn -- perhaps more to health education and less to advocacy, or more to developing a strong volunteer network and less to developing support groups. However, a parish nurse must respond to the needs of a community as they are identified and not avoid the roles that are more difficult for her or him.

**From the book Health Ministry in the Local Congregation by Urich and Brown.**

They suggest that a congregation can be an advocate, speaking for those who have little or no voice. Various individuals have done this in the past. I remember the struggle to get sex education in the schools a few years back.

Another model is the congregation as a place of healing. We can explore the capacity of the congregation to promote health, healing and wholeness both here and in the community. I've mentioned some of the ways we have done this already.

There is a role the congregation can take as health provider. There are traditions of religious communities running hospitals, clinics and other kinds of health services.

There is also a model of a congregation acting as a healing agent among members and within the community. To quote from Urich and Brown, "being a healing agent requires that the congregation itself become a means of healing. Where there is brokenness, the congregation will offer itself as a means of healing. Where there is brokenness, the congregation will offer itself as a means of healing. This style is rich in tradition and symbolism. This is the role of Israel, the people of God, as a "light to the nations." It is

the Suffering Servant found in the prophet Isaiah. It is the role of John the Baptist as a forerunner, the one who breaks open the message, who prepares the way for God's activity. It is the role of the mediator, who establishes a common ground, a bridge, a connection, between parts and parties that are split, broken and disconnected, uniting the alienated.

Common formats for the congregation using this style can be those of offering "good office" or neutral context and persons for disputes, discussion, mediation between persons or groups. It can use its symbolic power to offer legitimacy to outsiders, or less popular viewpoints. It can sponsor forums, educational seminars and workshops for topics (such as health) that are often only discussed by groups with vested interests. It can foster dialogue between groups."