

THE PRIMARY HEALTH CARE APPROACH

In 1978, the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the primary health care approach as the basis for effective delivery of health services. The primary health care approach is both a philosophy of health care and an approach to providing health services. The primary health care approach embraces five types of care: promotive; preventive; curative; rehabilitative; and supportive/palliative. In delivering each type of care, under the primary health care approach, the focus is on preventing illness and promoting health. The primary health care approach is effective in responding to the needs of various client groups from individuals through families and communities to populations. The principles of primary health care are accessibility, public participation, health promotion, appropriate technology and intersectoral cooperation.

Accessibility means that the five types of health care are universally available to all clients regardless of geographic location. In many cases, the principle of accessibility can best be operationalized by having communities define and manage necessary health care services. Distribution of health professionals in rural, remote and urban communities is key to the principle of accessibility. Accessibility means that clients will receive appropriate care from the appropriate health care professional, within a time frame that is appropriate.

Public participation means clients are encouraged to participate in making decisions about their own health, in identifying the health needs of their community, and in considering the merits of alternative approaches to addressing those needs. Adoption of the principle of public participation ensures respect for diversity. It also means that the design and delivery of health care is flexible and responsive. Participation ensures effective and strategic planning for, and the evaluation of, health care services in a community.

Health promotion involves health education, nutrition, sanitation, maternal and child health care, immunization, prevention and control of endemic disease. The goal of health promotion is to reduce the demands for curative and rehabilitative care. Through health promotion, individuals and families build an understanding of the determinants of health.¹ Individuals and families thereby develop skills to improve and maintain their health and well-being. School health programs are an important method of promoting health and self-esteem.

Appropriate technology means that modes of care are appropriately adapted to the community's social, economic and cultural development. The adoption of the principle of appropriate technology highlights the importance of improved knowledge and of on-going capacity building to the design and delivery of health care services. It means consideration of alternatives to high-cost, high-tech services. The principle of appropriate technology recognizes the importance of developing and testing innovative models of health care and of disseminating the results of research related to health care.

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Intersectoral cooperation recognizes that health and well-being is linked to both economic and social policy. Intersectoral cooperation is needed to establish national and local health goals, healthy public policy, and the planning and evaluation of health services. The adoption of the principle of intersectoral cooperation will ensure the providers from different disciplines collaborate and function interdependently to meet the needs of health care consumers and their families. It also means that health professionals will participate in government policy formulation and evaluation, as well as in the design and delivery of health care services. It also means that services must be delivered and evaluated in an integrated and congruent fashion.

The goal of nursing practice is to improve the health of clients. In working to that goal, nurses must apply the five principles of the primary health care approach. This is true for nurses involved in direct care, in education, in research, in administration, or in policy roles.

Primary health care should not be confused with “primary care” or “primary nursing.” Primary care is a medical concept referring to a situation wherein the physician provides diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up for a specific disease or problem. Primary nursing is a system of delivering nursing services whereby a nurse is responsible for planning the 24-hour care of a specific patient. Both of these concepts are illness-oriented concepts.

Nurses must be involved in research, planning, and implementation and evaluation of health promotion strategies in a variety of institutional and community settings. Nurses should actively seek to raise public awareness. In their role as health promoters and educators, nurses should encourage, support and advocate activities and services that provide current information. Raising awareness should include educating professional peers regarding the necessity and benefits of collaborative action in service provision, as well as in the identification of service gaps and the development of needed services.

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Also see:

Position Statement: *Framework for Canada's Health System* (June 2000).

CNA Publication: *Commitment Required: Making the Right Changes to Improve the Health of Canadians* (1996).

Replaces:

CNA Position Statement: *Comprehensive School Health* (June 1994).

References:

¹ Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, WHO, (1989).

Strategies for Population Health – Investing in the Health of Canadians, ACPH, (1994).