

Public Health Nursing in Communities

Around 1900, most nurses cared for sick people in private homes, not hospitals. But a state-wide health crisis was brewing and nurses came to the forefront in the new field of public health nursing.



Newcomers drawn by Washington's booming economy crowded into cities and small towns. Living conditions were unsanitary, infant and childhood mortality rates were high, and a deadly epidemic of tuberculosis spread statewide. In response, state health officials and Red Cross chapters deployed public health nurses to schools, factories, and homes. Nurses hunted down TB cases, surveyed risky worksites, inspected schools, visited mothers and babies, and taught disease prevention methods. Through public health nursing efforts, TB rates fell, communicable childhood diseases abated, and infant survival rates and workplace health improved. Public trust in nurses was rising.



Two Crises: War and the Great Flu Epidemic

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917, nurses across the state joined the American Red Cross and U.S. Army, and staffed military hospitals at home and in France. Washington's health departments and civilian hospitals were stripped of nursing staff, creating a severe nurse shortage and spurring a rush of young women to enter nurses' training. As the war reached its peak in the autumn of 1918, the devastating epidemic of influenza made its way to the Pacific Northwest. Nurses organized nursing care through public health departments and visiting nurse services and worked exhaustively to isolate cases in homes and hospitals.

Service in war and leadership during the influenza epidemic heightened public respect for the nursing profession. Red Cross chapters and new Federal funding added public health and school nurses to many communities. Washington's health officials joined nurses' efforts to increase post-graduate training in public health nursing. The state's first university-based school of nursing at the University of Washington admitted its first students in 1918 in a public health specialty course. Its success opened the way for expanding interest in a five-year curriculum awarding the degree of Bachelor of Science in Nursing.



Visiting nurse in the doorway of the Nurses Home of Seattle General Hospital, circa 1929.
Red Cross Nurse, World War I. Red Cross Home Nursing Pin, circa 1940s. (Washington State Historical Society)