

**THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL NURSE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL HEALTH PROGRAMME AND SERVICES**

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***ABSTRACT***

*This study investigated the roles of the school nurse in the implementation of school health programme and services. The study indicated that nurses have been a part of the school setting since the late 1800s, when alongside other medical visitors they provided student inspection to identify those with communicable diseases needing treatment. To prepare the nurses for the great task faced by them there must be School Health Programme (SHP) which comprises of all projects/activities in the school environment for the promotion of the health and development of the school community. The programme promotes growth and development of every child taking into consideration his/her health needs; create awareness of the collaborative efforts of the school, home and the community health promotion; develop health consciousness among the learners, etc. according to the study the programme helps prepare the learner and make her a qualified and registered nurse or midwife who has chosen to gain additional experience, training and qualifications to become specialist in Health Education and Community/Public Health. Besides it was observed that these additional qualifications help the school nurse to support students in making healthy lifestyle choices, enabling them to reach their full potentials and enjoy healthy lives/living. With the help of the preparation nurses are equipped to possess such qualities as excellent communication skills; self awareness and emotional stability; the ability to win the trust of children and encourage them to talk about their problems; the ability to relate well with people of all ages and backgrounds; a responsible attitude to work; a non-judgmental approach; knowledge of health needs of children and young people; a clear understanding of confidentiality issues, etc. Those qualities help the school nurse in performing their numerous roles as coordination and implementation of school health programme and services; provision of health education through Information Education Communication (IEC); provision of direct care for injuries, acute illness for students and long-term management of students with special health care needs, etc. One of the recommendations was that every school should have a school clinic where school health programmes are coordinated and rendered.*

***KEY WORDS: School Nurse, School Health Programme, Role of the School Nurse.***

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## INTRODUCTION

The school is a meeting ground for children of all ages, varied homes, socio-economic background and health status. This is where they spend a sizeable part of their days and irrespective of the fact that the school is a place of learning where knowledge is acquired, the students may be exposed to a variety of hazards from physical injuries to infections from the environment and other children. In order to benefit from the teachings of the school and also become good and healthy citizens in the future, the health of these children becomes very important. Apart from being taken care of when exposed to infections, they need to be furnished with a lot of health-related information that would benefit them initially and in future. Therefore, the implementation of school health programme and services becomes vital since it encompasses all activities out in the school in the interest of health of the pupils, school personnel and people around the school community. One of the actors in the implementation and rendering of school health programme and services is the nurse (Federal Ministry of Education, 1100L).

Crosta (1101X) referred to a nurse as a person who had formally been educated and trained in the care of the sick or disabled; they use clinical judgement to protect illness/injury, alleviate suffering, advocate in health care for individuals, families, communities and they entire populations. This writer further wrote that one of the places a nurse could practice is the school. Therefore, the school nurse is a nurse whose role is to render services in the school. The school nurse is a qualified and registered nurse or midwife who has chosen to gain additional experience, training and qualifications to become specialist in Health Education and Community/Public Health and these additional qualifications help the school nurse to support students in making healthy lifestyle choices, enabling them to reach their full potentials and enjoy healthy lives/living (National careers service, 1101L). A role is the duty or function performed by an individual. Implementation is seen as the carrying out, execution, practice or putting a decision or plan into effect. In this case, it is the execution of planned health-related activities in the school community known as the School Health Programme and Services.

School health programme and services are the health programmes in the school setting that take care of the health needs of both staff and more importantly, those of students and the primary objectives of this programme are developing an understanding of health, providing necessary learning activities and services which play key roles in the maintenance and improvement of good health of both learners and school personnel (Moronkola, 11011). The school nurse is one of the implementers of the planned activities and services for these primary objectives to be attained. This paper therefore discusses the Role of the School Nurse in the Implementation of School Health Programme and Services.

### *The Inception of the School Nurse*

Nurses have been a part of the school setting since the late 1000s, when alongside other medical visitors they provided student inspection to identify those with communicable diseases needing treatment (United States (US) Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Services, 11000). The success of these early programme developed into more formalized medical services when in October 1, 11011, New York City hired the first school nurse named Linda Rogersto who provided for the routine inspection of all students to detect contagious eye and skin diseases and thereafter employed more school nurses to help carry out these activities (US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Services). Since then, several states and countries joined in the employment of different cadre of school nurses to aid in the implementation of school health programme and services.

In Nigeria, the School health programme had adopted a multi-sectoral approach in order to realize its full potentials, so specific roles were assigned to stakeholders for its effective implementation. Therefore, in chapter III, section III, sub-section V.M of the **National School Health Policy**, the school nurse was mentioned as one of the members of the **School Based Health Committee** for the implementation of the **School Health Programme** (Federal Ministry of Education, 1100L).

### *The School Health Programme*

**School Health Programme (SHP)** comprises of all projects/activities in the school environment for the promotion of the health and development of the school community and it is one of the strategies for the achievement of "Health for All" (HFA) declaration, education and health related **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** (Federal Ministry of Education, 1100L). As recorded in chapter II, section II, sub-sections I and II of the **National School Health Policy**, the main goal of the **SHP** was to improve the health of learners as responsible and productive citizens; the objectives were to:

Promote growth and development of every child taking into consideration his/her health needs;

Create awareness of the collaborative efforts of the school, home and the community health promotion;

Develop health consciousness among the learners;

Create awareness on the availability and utilization of various health-related resources in the community;

Promote collaboration in a world of interdependence, social interaction and technological exposure in addressing emergent health issues; and

Build the skills of learners and staff for health promotion in the school community (Federal Ministry of Education).

The scope of the **SHP** in chapter II, section II, sub-section III of the policy include:

Healthful school environment;

School feeding services;

Skill-based health education;

School health services; and

School, home and community relationships (Federal Ministry of Education, 1100L).

The policy recognizes that the various services to be provided in the programme were highly technical and required the acquisition of appropriate knowledge; hence the school nurse is one of the principal actors in implementation of the **SHP**.

### **The Role of the School Nurse**

**Rationale:** school nursing is a specialized practice that advances the well-being, academic success and lifelong achievements and overall health of students. Keeping children healthy, safe in school and ready to learn should be a top priority for both healthcare and educational system. **National Association of School Nurses (NASN)** (1101L) noted that with millions of students in the schools, educational institutions were excellent locations to promote health in children and the school nurse was uniquely positioned to meet students' health needs. Since healthy children were successful learners, school nurses advocate for the physical, emotional, mental and social health

of students. **NASN** viewed school nurses as leaders in the school community who oversee all school health policies, programmes, provide expertise/oversight of school health services and promote health education.

The school nurse is expected to have the following qualities and capabilities:

Excellent communication skills;

Self awareness and emotional stability;

The ability to win the trust of children and encourage them to talk about their problems;

The ability to relate well with people of all ages and backgrounds;

A responsible attitude to work;

A non-judgmental approach;

Knowledge of health needs of children and young people;

A clear understanding of confidentiality issues;

The ability to stay calm in an emergency;

The ability to keep accurate records; and

Good team working skills and the ability to work on one's initiative (**National Careers Service, 11011**).

The following are the roles the school nurse fulfills to foster child and adolescent health as well as their educational successes and the health of the entire school community/it environs:

**Coordinator/Team Leader:** the school nurse functions as a leader as well as coordinator in the implementation of school health programme and services. The team may include a school physician (who may be a pediatrician since pediatricians were knowledgeable about general pediatrics, child health and adolescent health), health aides, clerical staff, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers and other licensed practical nurses. The school nurse coordinates the activities of the school health team in the provision of primary care and psychosocial services to the students and others within the school community.

The school nurse leads in the development of programmes and procedures for the provision of the school health services at an individual or community level, relying on student-centered, evidence-based practice and performance data to informed care (**National Association of School Nurses (NASN) 11011**). The school nurse provides system level leadership and acts as change agent, promoting education and healthcare reform in the bid to improve issues related to health care, consumer care, health and wellness (**American Nurses Association (ANA) + NASN, 11011**).

As the health care expert within the school, the school nurse assesses the overall system of care and develops plan for ensuring that health needs were met and also for responding to emergencies, disasters, confidential communication and documentation of students' health information. The nurse also leads in developing and evaluating school health policies in health promotion, protection, chronic disease management, emergency medical condition management, mental health protection/intervention and infectious disease prevention/management (**NASN, 11011**).

**Promotes Health / Health Education:** the school nurse provides health education through Information Education Communication (**IEC**) to individual students, group of students, teachers, members within and outside the school community. As a healthcare educator, the school nurse assists on health education curriculum development teams and helps develop health education/promotion topics which may include nutrition, exercise, smoking prevention/cessation, oral health, prevention of sexually transmitted infections and other infectious diseases, substance use/abuse, immunizations, adolescent pregnancy prevention and parenting (**Denehy, 11001**). **Beyond**

promoting health of students within the school, the school nurse also encourages students to maintain healthy habits and behaviours like proper hand washing, personal and environmental hygiene, maintaining healthy relationships when they were not in school and generally teaches them sexuality education. These can be provided also with the aid of fliers, pamphlets and posters pasted around the school compound.

**Care Provider:** the school nurse provides direct care for injuries, acute illness for students and long-term management of students with special health care needs. Responsibilities include assessment and treatment within the scope of professional nursing practice, communication with parents, referral to physicians and development of individualized health care plan, especially for students with chronic medical conditions like asthma. **NASN (100L)** noted that ideally, the health care plan should align with the management plan directed by the child's pediatrician and regularly updated through close communication.

As a leader of the school health team, the school nurse must assess the students' health status, identify health problems that may create barrier to educational progress and develop a health care plan for management of the problems in the school setting. The school nurse provides screening and referral for health conditions. Health screenings can decrease the negative effects of health problems on education by identifying students with potential underlying medical problems early enough and referring them for treatment as appropriate. Early identification, referral to hospitals and use of appropriate available resources promote optimal outcomes (**American Academy of Pediatrics, 100D**). The school nurse oversees vision, hearing, **Body Mass Index (BMI)** and mental health screening procedures. This will help in early identification and management of students' eyes, hearing, mental health problems as well as malnourished children. The school nurse monitors immunizations and vaccinations given to the students as well.

**Promotes Healthy Environment:** the school nurse **Idiono I. E.** for the physical and emotional safety of the school community by ensuring appropriate exclusion of infectious illnesses and reporting communicable diseases where required; participates in environmental safety monitoring of the school playgrounds, indoor air quality, (that is, proper ventilation) and potential hazards elimination; takes part in implementation of plan for prevention, management of school violence, bullying, disaster and terrorism events; coordinates with school authority in developing suicide prevention plans. In addition, if a school determines that drug testing was a part of its programme, the school nurse is included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the testing programme (**American Academy of Pediatrics, 100D**). The school nurse generally supervises and encourages environmental sanitation of the entire school compound.

**Mediator/Liaison Personnel:** the school nurse is the liaison personnel between students, school personnel, families, healthcare professionals and the community. As the case manager for students with health problems, the school nurse ensures that there was adequate communication and collaboration among the families, physicians and providers of essential resources, in order to ensure consistent, coordinated care; also works with community organizations and primary health care providers to make the community a healthy place for all children, families and the school community members. The school nurse embarks on home visits to families in need and child tracking for sick students when necessary.

**Counselor:** the school nurse provides counseling services in the school community. There are several factors that can lead to emotional problems among students which may interfere with their learning abilities. For example, children from broken homes lack emotional support and encouragement in their studies which can lead to psychological problems such as truancy and depression. The school nurse should be

able to identify children with problems that can disturb their studies and help proffer solutions. The school nurse can also counsel teachers, other people in the school community as well as parents.

**Evaluator:** evaluation and dissemination of the outcome and progress of school health programmes is essential. It is the responsibility of the school nurse to do these as feedback mechanism in form of report writing to the programme planners in order to determine the progress and impact of the programme. The school nurse develops a format for presenting the report, follows the format for presenting the evaluation report, points out the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and offers the way forward (recommendation) for revising the programme to maintain or enhance strengths while alleviating the weak points in the programme. Hackbarth and Gall (1990) noted that early evaluation of the programme was necessary and should focus on the types of services and quality of care provided and that documentation of programme impacts, such as changes in school population health indicators or improved academic outcome of students were important evaluation tools to be included in the report.

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, the school nurse is seen as one of the key actors in the implementation of the school health programme and services. In the school, students may be exposed to a variety of hazards that could interfere with their health, hence learning and acquiring knowledge. The school nurse in his or her role in the school health programme, is a coordinator/team leader, promotes health/ health education, provides care, promotes healthy environment, mediates, counsels and evaluates the school health programmes. Having a full-time school nurse in every school is the best means of ensuring a strong connection with each student's medical needs, the home and providing a coordinated mental, physical, emotional and social care for the children and these support their educational success.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are suggested:

Every school should have a school clinic where school health programmes are coordinated and rendered;

Qualified school nurses should be posted to all schools; and

The school community members should cooperate with the school nurse in rendering the school health services.

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