

OHNIG
Fact Sheet #1
The Occupational Health Nurse

Anne Paramonczyk RN, BHScN, MA-ED, COHN (C), COHN- CRSP on behalf of the Occupational Health Nurses Interest Group of RNAO

Imagine if you will a day in the life of an Occupational Health Nurse.

Christine is an Occupational Health Nurse who works for a large manufacturing firm. As she walks to her office in the Occupational Health Centre, she notices the safety record for the month. She has been working with senior staff and workers to reduce work related injuries. The health and safety training of staff and employers has proven to be successful as reflected in the significant drop of work related injuries. Her next step is to monitor safety reports to evaluate the effectiveness of the education program.

Her day begins by assessing a woman recovering from depression. She assists her with the development of a gradual return to work plan following a leave of absence. Christine works with the woman to identify strategies to deal effectively with work responsibilities and her integration back into her job.

Weekly follow-up with the employee to review her progress will assist with the implementation of coping strategies if necessary. A graduated modified return to work plan will assist this employee to continue to be a productive and vital member of the workforce.

The second client is an employee with insulin dependent diabetes who has been having difficulty controlling his blood sugar. Christine reviews his diet and insulin requirements, which need to be altered as he is starting a fitness program. She also recognizes that diabetes is a progressive disease but with careful monitoring of blood sugar, incorporated with diet and exercise, the disease can be controlled and the progression of the disease can be slowed.

The third client is a new employee. Christine carries out a health assessment and identifies possible hypertension for which she recommends a referral to the man's family physician. Christine has identified a health issue that can be treated. This will benefit the worker's health status.

Christine then hurries off to a health and safety committee meeting where she advocates for a personal protective equipment program. She has been working on a program with senior management and the union to develop specific policies around personal protective equipment (PPE) that should be used in each area of the plant. Her knowledge of the legislative requirements and the specific equipment needs allow her to work effectively with the committee. Over the lunch break she runs a stress management program for a group of employees dealing with retirement and associated life-style changes. She understands that change is often difficult for people. Christine works with this group to develop strategies that reduce heightened anxiety about retirement decisions. Christine later meets with the plant manager and company vice president to promote a workplace health promotion program that addresses the need to increase physical activity among the staff.

Christine's work combines both individual counselling and group work. Her focus has changed over the years to emphasise health promotion and prevention. However her scope of practice is broad to address the health needs of employees of different ages with diverse health needs. She believes she makes a difference in the lives of employees.

The above examples describe only a fraction of what Occupational Health Nurses are involved with on a daily basis. Occupational Health Nurses work in diverse settings and with different groups of clients. Regardless of the setting Occupational Health Nurses are committed to improving the lives of employees and their families.

Background

Occupational Health Nurses focus on promoting and restoring health, preventing injury and illness and protecting workers from occupational and environmental hazards. Their dedication to provide excellence in nursing practice and the commitment to life-long learning is reflected in all aspects of their work.

The origins of Occupational Health Nursing began with Florence Nightingale who illuminated the connection between environmental conditions and the health of the populous. Improved environmental conditions translated into improved health of the population. The focus of her work was nursing the health of the public-Public Health Nursing- that in turn laid the foundation of Occupational Health Nursing.

Accompanying the increase in employment at the beginning of the 20th century was the need to care for workers - a need that was met through Occupational Health Nursing. At that time, the industrial centers were populated not only by the workers themselves but also their families.

The health problems of the families were initially a public health concern. Employers recognized the value of having nurses involved with the health of their employees and eventually with safety as well.ⁱ

Diversity of Practice

The science and practice of occupational and environmental health nursing is based on a synthesis of knowledge from multiple disciplines. It is essential that nurses understand the scientific principles that provide the theoretical basis of the profession. In addition to the nursing and occupational health sciences (i.e. toxicology, industrial hygiene and ergonomics), effective occupational health nursing practice requires knowledge and understanding of public health (i.e. environmental health) and epidemiology and social /and behavioural sciences.ⁱⁱ

Today, the primary objectives of Occupational Health Nursing include the following:

1. Prevention of work-related illness and injuries through a systematic process of assessment, data collection, planning, intervention and evaluation.
2. Evaluation and treatment of work-related injury or illness.
3. Promotion of health and safety activities among workers.
4. Advocacy within in the workplace in terms of environmental concerns as they relate to the
5. workers, their families and the community ⁱⁱⁱ
6. Development and maintenance of an adequate record system;
7. Development of statistical and epidemiological data for relevant program development and evaluation;
8. Developing and evaluating programs to meet the identified health needs of individuals; acting as a resource to the health and safety committee and management;
9. Interpreting and promoting conformity to legislation

- **i** Health Nurses Inc. (2001), Core Curriculum for Occupational & Environment Health Nursing, W.B. Saunders Company, Toronto
- **ii** Ibid.
- **iii** Ibid.

Resources:

- Occupational Helath Nurses Interest Group (OHNIG) <http://www.ohnig.org/>
 - Canadian Occupational Health Nurses (COHN) <http://www.cohna-aciist.ca/english/>
 - Canadian Nurses Associations (CNA) http://cna-aiic.ca/CNA/default_e.aspx
 - Ontario Occupational Health Nurses Association(OOHNA) http://www.oohna.on.ca/pages/general_main.asp
 - American Board for Occupational Health Nurses (ABOHN) <http://www.abohn.org/>
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The RNAO Practice Page is an initiative of the RNAO Practice Committee. Feedback and suggestions are welcomed!

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