

**EDUCATION FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSES:  
AN EXERCISE IN PLANNING TO MEET  
PRESENT-DAY NEEDS**

N. BUNDLE

*Division of Occupational Health and Radiation Control, Health Commission of New  
South Wales, Lidcombe, New South Wales, Australia*

**ABSTRACT**

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The background is given to the establishment of a committee to advise on occupational health nursing education in New South Wales, Australia. The committee's terms of reference are given together with the methodology and subsequent findings. The committee's fourteen conclusions outline the proposals for occupational health nursing education and describe the three levels of education recommended.

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Training for registered, general nurses in New South Wales is, generally speaking, a three-year hospital based programme. The curriculum for this programme has to date focussed on illness rather than health, and whilst some occupational diseases may be learnt, very little teaching, if any, is directed towards the principles and the practice of occupational health.

Subsequently, the registered nurse who takes a position in the field of occupational health must seek post-basic training. The fact that the majority of the 340 practising occupational health nurses in New South Wales work without the company of medical or nursing colleagues and therefore without any on-the-job training, increases the need for post-basic training. For a number of years two courses were available: a Certificate Course in Occupational Health Nursing and an Orientation Course for Occupational Health Nurses.

The Certificate Course was first conducted in 1949 and, apart from several years when it was conducted on a day-release basis, the course was full time for four months. After 1975 a change in the funding arrangements made it impossible to continue this course. As an alternative, a Diploma Course in Community Health Nursing was offered with the possibility of a major elective in Occupational Health Nursing. This course was of twelve months duration and it was stipulated that the occupational health elective would only be conducted if 15-20 of the 30 students on the course chose to do the elective.

Because the course is full-time for twelve months and there are no scholarships available to occupational health nurses, and because there is no guarantee that the occupational health elective will be conducted, it was obvious that the Diploma Course in Community Health Nursing would not fulfil the post-basic training needs of occupational health nurses.

The Orientation Course is a ten-day course and, as the name implies, sets out only to orient the nurse to the principles and practice of occupational health; it does not attempt to provide the necessary comprehensive training.

Hence, in 1975 when it became known that the Certificate Course would no longer be available, it was realised that we had the opportunity to take a fresh look at occupational health nursing education; to review the past programmes in New South Wales, to consider developments in other Australian States and in countries overseas and to seek the ideas and opinions of practising occupational health nurses and their employers.

With government backed initiatives, a committee was established under the auspices of the Nurses Education Board of New South Wales. Between them, the twelve members of the committee represented occupational health nursing, nursing education generally, adult education, curriculum design, and research.

#### COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference established for the Committee were: to advise on additional education required by registered nurses to equip them to fulfil the occupational health nursing role, to advise what courses should be made available in New South Wales for occupational health nurses and to advise on the institutions which might provide such courses.

The Committee accepted that an occupational health nurse is a registered general nurse who functions as a nurse to fulfil the objectives of an occupational health service as defined in 1959 by I.L.O. in Recommendation 112. The Committee approached its task in four ways:

- by examining the present opportunities for the training of nurses in occupational health nursing in New South Wales,
- by obtaining the ideas and opinions of practising occupational health nurses and their employers by means of a mail questionnaire,
- by interviewing various experts in the field of education and occupational health, and
- by corresponding with relevant educational institutions, seeking information.

#### COMMITTEE'S FINDINGS

##### Present opportunities for training nurses in occupational health in New South Wales

The Committee studied the Basic General Nursing Course, the Orientation Course for Occupational Health Nurses and the Diploma Course in Community Health Nursing. It found that the basic nursing course does not adequately



prepare the nurse to practise specifically in the field of occupational health. It also found that the Orientation Course is an introductory course which familiarises registered general nurses with the occupational health nurse's role and establishes a minimum standard of knowledge and skills, but does not provide comprehensive knowledge and skills about occupational health practice, e.g. toxicology, industrial hygiene, industrial relations and other related areas.

The Diploma Course in Community Health Nursing was found to be generally oriented to the needs of community nurses employed by the Health Commission of New South Wales and, because it is a full-time course, very few, if any, occupational health nurses employed in private industry are able to undertake it. The major elective in occupational health has not been conducted and therefore has not been tested, and it seems unlikely that it will be conducted in the near future.

The Committee also considered opportunities for continuing education and found these to be limited to a series of specialised courses, seminars, and workshops. The Committee noted particularly that it has been necessary for nurses to travel overseas to obtain advanced education in occupational health.

#### **The ideas and opinions of practising occupational health nurses and their employers**

To obtain these ideas and opinions, two questionnaires were designed: the first was to obtain background information on occupational health nurses as well as their ideas and opinions on education programmes, the second sought the views of the employers on the role of occupational health nurses and their educational needs.

The questionnaire distributed to 315 nurses known to be working in the field of occupational health generated a response rate of 50.3% (160), whereas the questionnaire which was distributed to 210 employers generated a response rate of 46.8%. Follow-up questionnaires resulted in a total response of 54.3% for nurses and 51.4% for employers.

The detailed findings of this survey were so extensive that they were published in a separate document intended to be read in conjunction with the Committee's Report.

Amongst many other points, the survey revealed that nurses remain in occupational health for a considerable period of their professional career, that many occupational health nurses are presently nearing retirement, that by far the majority have not received any specific training in occupational health and that a significant majority work in professional isolation. While both nurses and employers saw the occupational health nurse's role in a wide context, the nurses placed more emphasis on counselling and prevention. Although the employers put more emphasis on treatment, there was evidence that they appreciated the nurse's contribution to the prevention of illness and injury.

A significant majority of nurses stated that they would benefit from a future course, but the nurses did not show a strong preference for a particular award. The restrictions listed by the nurses were: the employer's willingness to release

the nurse, family commitments, length of the course, finance, and distance to be travelled.

**From the interviews and the correspondence**

The purpose of interviewing the various experts and corresponding with the educational institutions was to obtain information on occupational health nursing courses in other Australian States and in countries overseas. It was also necessary to explore the university, technical, and advanced education system for institutions which could conduct future courses.

**COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS**

As a result of its activities and discussions, the Committee listed 14 conclusions:

1. It is essential that post-basic education and training are available in New South Wales for nurses either practising in the field of occupational health or interested in entering the field.
2. There should be three levels of post-basic occupational health nursing education, namely: Orientation Course in Occupational Health Nursing to introduce the registered nurse to the principles and practice of occupational health; Comprehensive Occupational Health Nursing Course to provide the registered nurse with a thorough theoretical training to qualify for a range of nursing positions in the occupational health field and Advanced Occupational Health Nursing Course to enable the qualified occupational health nurse to study occupational health at an advanced level for a position as an educator, consultant or administrator.
3. There is also need for opportunities for continuing education such as seminars, workshops and courses aimed to both update and expand the occupational health nurse's knowledge. Indeed, there should be a system which provides evidence that an occupational health nurse has updated her knowledge and kept abreast of changes in occupational health technology similar to the system of certification conducted in the United States of America.
4. As occupational health is part of community health, ideally occupational health nurses should be trained in relevant aspects of community health. However, while it could, the Diploma Course in Community Health Nursing does not at present provide a solution for occupational health nursing education.
5. When courses for occupational health nurses are planned, regard must be paid to the factors highlighted by the nurses which would restrict attendance, such as the demand upon work time and the employer's willingness to release, the demand upon the nurse's own time and family commitments, finance and distance. Therefore there should be a degree of flexibility in the design of courses, particularly of the comprehensive course.



A variety of attendance patterns should be available and external study considered. If the comprehensive course was designed on a unit basis, students would be able to undertake units according to their needs and opportunities.

6. The Orientation Course, as currently conducted, adequately fulfils the need for the recommended orientation level and could be satisfactorily continued.
7. The development of the comprehensive course is essential and action should be initiated immediately to ensure that this course is available in the near future.
8. The most appropriate institution to conduct the comprehensive course is the Department of Technical and Further Education. This Department is vocationally oriented, has a comprehensive approach to research and planning, is flexible in its attitude, and many of its existing courses are linked with occupation and health.
9. Appropriate colleges of advanced education should also be approached to conduct the comprehensive course, particularly with a view to developing an external course.
10. Whilst it is the prerogative of the particular department or institution the award to be granted to the comprehensive course should be U.G.2 (Under graduate 2).
11. The development of the advanced course should follow the establishment of the comprehensive course and to this end the Committee's Report should be forwarded to Sydney University.
12. Any institution providing a course in occupational health nursing should have on its academic staff a qualified occupational health nurse with qualifications in education.
13. The planning of occupational health nursing education should not be undertaken by one person but should be a co-operative effort done in consultation with practising nurses, employers and representatives of the consumers of occupational health care. To this end a committee should be established under the auspices of the Nurses' Education Board of New South Wales to continually review and advise on occupational health nursing education in New South Wales.
14. The Report of the Committee should be made generally available for distribution to nurses, employers, unions and educational institutions in New South Wales and Australia.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Ten specific recommendations were made by the Committee. Basically these referred to the three levels of occupational health nursing education and proposed the institutions where the various levels could be conducted. In addition, it was recommended that financial assistance should be made available

by the Government for occupational health nursing education and for scholarships for nurses, including those who wish to obtain teaching qualifications. The final recommendation stressed the establishment of the committee to continually review and advise on programmes of education, thereby ensuring a high standard and meeting always the current needs of nurses, employers and consumers.