



POSITION STATEMENT

School Nurse Role in Bioterrorism Emergency Preparedness

HISTORY:

With heightened awareness of potential vulnerabilities to terrorism after September 11, 2001, and in readiness for the possibility of bioterrorism emergencies in which school nurses could serve as front line responders, school nurses have a responsibility to participate in planning and implementing a response to such threats to the school community. In addition, school nurses are the only professional health care providers in many schools. School nurses represent a unique and vital resource relative to the successful creation and implementation of bioterrorism preparedness plans for schools.

DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE:

There are two categories of bioterrorist agents: chemical and biological. Chemical agents kill, seriously injure, or debilitate victims by causing serious chemical burns and/or irritation to skin and eyes or by interrupting the transfer of neurochemical information. Use of biological agents results in the exposure to bacterial, viral, fungal, or other pathogens against which large numbers of people are not immunized or otherwise protected and that will result in great morbidity and/or mortality (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Bioterrorist activities are also intended to create panic, chaos, economic disruption, and infrastructure fracture. Attacks using these agents could occur at or near schools. School nurses must be prepared to respond.

RATIONALE:

School nurses have easier access to large populations of people than many health professionals and are, therefore, in positions to monitor unusual symptoms or signs, recognize patterns of symptom presentation, act to protect against spread of communicable diseases, and provide immediate treatment and decontamination for members of the school community. School nurses are the only professional health care providers in many schools. Some children spend up to 10 hours in school each day. Students, teachers, and staff work in close proximity to other people, increasing the easy spread of airborne and droplet borne diseases.

In addition, children are more vulnerable to biological or chemical attack and may show signs and symptoms sooner than the general population (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). Proactive and comprehensive training of school nurses in disease surveillance, emergency preparedness, response, and coordination with broader community resources would provide for early detection, reporting, and response to a bioterrorism event. A well-executed response could dramatically minimize the number of victims and possibly slow the spread of a biological agent in the case of a bioterrorist attack.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL NURSE:

School nurses are strategically placed to plan and implement responses to bioterrorist events within school environments. There are many skills and roles that school nurses bring to emergency preparedness:

- Surveillance and pattern recognition
- Ability to assess potential emergency risks
- Ability to assess the adequacy of emergency trainings and practice activities
- Position on the front line when an emergency occurs and involvement in the response to all serious adverse events that threaten the health, safety, or well-being of a school and its community
- Possession of detailed knowledge of the needs of children with special health care needs and the ability to plan for these students' needs in emergency situations
- Ability to assist in the short-term and long-term recovery phase after a traumatic event has occurred

Moreover, when a child becomes sick or arrives at school sick, a school nurse, when present in the school, may be the first and perhaps the only health care professional to assess, treat, and possibly refer the child to other health care facilities. Nurses are also trained to distinguish between panic, panic reactions/attacks and true symptomology of illness.

In the event of a biological or chemical attack on the United States, school nurses could be among the first health care professionals to recognize the event and respond. School nurses thus serve as essential public health sentinels in such events.

CONCLUSION:

It is the position of SNOW that school nurses should be designated and recognized as, and given the authority to act as, first responders to school-related mass casualty emergencies, including those resulting from bioterrorist events. School nurses should be trained in protection, detection, and treatment of victims of such events and in the command and control management techniques of the logistics of such a situation. In addition, training in the coordination of the response with other community providers is essential to maximize effectiveness of these other trainings. The strategic position of well-prepared nurses within the school environment has significant potential for minimizing the effects of a bioterrorist attack in school settings and, subsequently, in the community at large.

References/Resources:

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