AN EMERGING PRACTICE CONCERN:
IMPACTS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Purpose: To provide an educational approach to address environmental impacts caused by healthcare and nursing practice.

Background: Each year, more evidence is available of human health risks related to damage to the natural environment. Traditionally, nurses have been engaged in environmental health regarding patient exposures to toxic chemicals, air pollution, unsafe water of other harmful agents. Recently, there is evidence that healthcare and nursing practice causes harm to the natural environment through heavy energy use, large amounts of waste, and the use of numerous toxic chemicals in care processes. At the same time, nurses have a standard of practice that states “The registered nurse practices in an environmentally safe and healthy manner.” It is unclear to what extent nurses are aware of environmentally unsafe practices and what they do to address them.

Best Practice: At a State University College of Nursing, a multi-pronged approach was taken to provide more information in the nursing curriculum addressing environmental issues related to nursing practice. Relevant content was identified. The curriculum was analyzed for presence or absence of that content. Suggestions were made for how to introduce content on environmental issues into existing courses. For example, it was suggested that a discussion of hormone disrupting chemicals be included with a module on the hormonal system. In addition, several posters identifying environmental and health risks and nursing actions to mitigate them were developed for use in the practice labs on multiple campuses. Lastly, two videos were created providing faculty feedback about including environmental health topics in coursework and the practice labs.

Outcomes: Environmental health content was inserted into several existing courses, leading to student engagement and deeper exploration. A research study was developed based on student awareness of electronic waste and associated environmental and health hazards. The practice lab posters have been utilized across the state and presented at national webinars for practicing nurses. The videos are available for public viewing and have been disseminated nationally. Implications: Nursing education is quickly very full, and it is difficult to include information about emerging issues such as the environmental impacts of nursing practice in already full curriculum. Examples and tools such as those presented here can help faculty, students and practicing nurses learn about this important practice issue and professional responses to address it.

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