

Nurses as Role Models in Disease Prevention



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Submission: May 24, 2018; Published: May 29, 2018

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Opinion

The number of citizens in the United States over 65 years of age is anticipated to more than double during the next 25 years (at that time there will be approximately 75,000,000 Americans over the age of 65; this will represent over 20% of the population). This “graying of America” will elicit profound opportunities and challenges. Life expectancy in developed countries like the United States currently ranges from 76 to 80 years. With an aging population, there is a concomitant increase in chronic diseases, disabilities, injuries, health care costs and concerns for caregivers. Approximately 80 percent of all seniors have at least one chronic condition and 50 percent have at least two (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). However, life expectancy is not necessarily synonymous with living better.

Results of literally thousands of studies indicate that simple lifestyle changes can maintain, slow down and may even reverse physical declines related to the aging process. While there are no guarantees, heart disease, cancers, Alzheimer’s disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis, and depression may be managed and/or even prevented via one’s lifestyle. These phenomena (along with others) can create a great deal of angst for not only individuals, but their significant others as well. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that one’s health need not inevitably decline due to aging. The reality is that anyone can improve his/her wellbeing by adopting healthy lifestyle behaviors. In recent years, researchers have recognized metabolic syndrome is a common contributing factor to the development of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers. The syndrome is characterized by increased waist circumference, low HDL (high-density lipoprotein) cholesterol, high levels of triglycerides, high blood pressure, as well as high levels of glucose. The most direct causes are overweight and inactivity, but dietary factors may play a role as well. More recently, it is acknowledged that the link between lifestyle and morbidity/mortality is not only a Western issue; populations in Asia, Latin America, and probably Africa are also susceptible to metabolic syndrome and concomitant diseases of chronicity.

However, what are the keys to changing behaviors of an entire citizenry? The ubiquitous questions of who, when, how, and where are simple, yet salient, and certainly complex when it comes to encouraging and ultimately changing one’s way

of life. Who holds the key regarding prevention? The family; schools; teachers; physicians; coaches; communities; legislators? Interventions aimed at changing lifestyles or behaviors, for an entire population, or even an individual are sometimes met with substantial skepticism. Additionally, enumerating the outcomes of intervention can be a challenge and require persistence and patience, as behavioral changes may take months or even years to yield positive results. However, noticeable and beneficial lifestyle changes in a population are indeed possible. This opinion paper posits that nurses can and should play a pivotal role in not only the treatment of disease; but the prevention of such as well. Once again nurses were identified last year, according to the annual Gallup poll on honesty and ethical standards, as the most trusted profession. Nurses have topped this list for the past 16 years. The vast majority (82%) of those polled described nurses’ ethics as high or very high. The public sees nurses, and the nursing profession as being honest, caring, compassionate, and are appreciative of the amount of time nurses spend with patients. The aforementioned can be summarized as nurses have the “human touch.”

Therefore, it is quite possible that the most significant aspect in a relationship to motivate a person to change his or her behavior – trust – already exists between a nurse and a patient. Nurses have the knowledge behind disease prevention; they have the prerequisite listening skills; they are able to communicate well; thus nurses have an excellent opportunity to change the lifestyle choices of their patients. Now, the glue which holds all of these lifestyle, knowledge, communication skills, and ability to motivate patients together is whether or not the nurse is a role model for a wellness lifestyle. Due to your position as a nurse, you are inherently viewed by patients as being trustworthy, knowledgeable, and skilled. Yet, you must be conscientiously aware of your lifestyle if you seek to change the behaviors of others. Role modelling, may well be the most effective strategy in passing on the knowledge, skills, and values of lifestyle to patients.

If you are going to help a patient understand and develop their own unique health and wellness value system, you must first develop, and live your own path to disease prevention. Failure to do such may not only compromise your personal health and productivity, but will similarly mitigate your effectiveness to change patient behavior, thus compromising their personal health and productivity. The efficacy of promoting healthy lifestyles and

behaviors is unmistakable. Obviously, the challenge is identifying the most effective intervention to result in behavior change. While a holistic approach utilizing health care providers; worksites; schools; teachers; media; and the legislative process is often utilized to promote wellness, this paper believes that a nurse may play the most significant role. Nurses are knowledgeable, trusted,

caring, and close to their patients. What better way to start changing behavior, encouraging healthy lifestyles, preventing disease, and improving the quality of life, than one nurse who is a wellness role model and who utilizes the “human touch” with one patient at a time?.



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DOI: [10.19080/JOJNHC.2018.08.555728](https://doi.org/10.19080/JOJNHC.2018.08.555728)

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