

THE FACE OF DIVERSITY

CHALLENGES IN SCHOOL HEALTH

by Immaculata Anyanwu, RN, MSc

Minnesota's burgeoning immigrant population has enriched our state. They also pose key health issues for schools. The school nurse has the challenging role of identifying health problems and maintaining optimal health for all students in a diverse school population.

School nursing has evolved from merely bandaging cuts or checking for head lice to giving Ritalin, mainstreaming children with complex health needs into regular classrooms, and accessing health care for the entire family. This diversification also reflects the student population. The United States has experienced a flood of immigrants within the last two decades. According to Healthy Minnesotans Update (2000), Minnesota has the largest Somali, Hmong and Liberian communities in the entire U.S., as well as a sizeable Latino population. There are about 80 languages and dialects spoken by students in Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools. While this diversity has brought enrichment to Minnesota it has also brought public health challenges to our schools.

Most immigrants come from countries where hepatitis B, tuberculosis and intestinal parasitic infections are endemic. Poor sanitation and nutrition, overcrowding, and underimmunization are the norms in their country of origin. Most of these immigrant children come to school in poor health, with tooth decay, malnourishment and psychological stress. When faced with these challenges in school and public health, it becomes a problem for all living in the state. In the school setting, these challenges take a still more serious priority. The student's ability to learn is compromised, which in turn decreases the overall standardized test scores in the state. It also decreases their ability to assimilate or become successful, independent and productive adults in society.

For many students and their families, the school nurse is the primary access to health care. This can be due to lack of health insurance or transportation difficulties, or out of ignorance of the U.S. health-care system. Most immigrant families are afraid to obtain healthcare (especially for free services like immunization) for fear of jeopardizing their chance of regularizing their immigrant status. The problem seems worse in undocumented immigrants. To deal with cultural diversity and meet the healthcare needs of every student under their care, school nurses have to be culturally sensitive, and to some extent acculturated in these many cultures that they work with.

Acculturation involves understanding the cultural health practices and special health needs of each immigrant group, and making use of interpreters to eliminate language barriers. The school nurse acts as a liaison between these families and the healthcare

system. Assistance is made available to the students and their families to identify and access health care (free and low-cost) without fear of reprisal. Ethnic, cultural and religious groups offering their services to assist are linked up with these families by the school nurse.

Finally, the school nurse has to counter the often stated fear that immigrant children pose a threat of contagious disease in the school setting. A good resource on this topic is the article by Rena Large of the NEA Health Information Network (*NEA Today*, October 2000). She makes the case for vigorous measures to alleviate under-vaccination and to apply — as always — Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines in schools, i.e., Universal Precautions.

REFERENCES

Large, R. National Education Association of the United States (*NEA Today*), Oct 2000, 19(2), 32. Take a Shot at Getting Immigrant Students Vaccinated.

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