



Reflections

By Deanna L. DeLong, RN, BS

of a School Nurse

Following years of work as a surgical nurse and manager, I became obsessed with a need for change. A whirlwind carried me away and deposited me into a swirling mist, otherwise known as the school health room, a misnomer as everyone appearing at my door claimed to be severely ill. The mist persisted until small tornadoes (otherwise known as

teenagers) blew into the health room complaining of various injuries and illnesses.

My sister, a school librarian, supplied my first reference manual, entitled *The School Nurse from the Black Lagoon*, by Mike Thaler. Miss Hearse the Nurse provided many helpful suggestions. I have concluded that my life will never be the same; hence, I'm writing my reflections. Perhaps my family will read them and come rescue me.

It has been a long time since I attended high school. Things have changed more than a bit since I was here the first time. One of the most striking changes is attire. The norm seems to be – anything goes! Baggy pants (requiring one to hold them up as one swaggers down the hall), bondage attire (dog collars, etc.), thong sandals (and undergarments), cropped shirts, and hip huggers are common. I'm proud to state it took me less than a week to stop dropping my jaw each time a student entered the health room.

I have discovered some new health concerns, as well. Glitter is a shining example. I frequently remove it from eyes, ears, hair and other body parts. Vomiting has become a favorite sport among the students. I imagine there are prizes for total amount, unique style, and overall projectile distance – some students are proficient and can produce on command. It is generally accompanied by horrific sounds followed by an array of belching and other less desirable sounds and smells. Tattoos and body piercing have added some new concerns. I am frequently called upon to lubricate tattoos and clean, remove or re-insert various pieces of body piercing jewelry.

The students have been most helpful. During my first semester they offered to instruct me in the practices of the health room. Suggestions were accompanied by such phrases as “the last nurse always...” or “the school policy has been to send us home upon experiencing the first symptom...”

Years in surgery prepared me to expect the unexpected, but the school health room has superseded those expectations. For example, one day I was visited by a delegation of three sophomores inquiring whether the health room furnishes condoms. I replied, “No, we do not.” They said, “You're always telling us to practice safe sex, so why don't you give us condoms?” My answer was: “We expect you to write but we don't furnish pens and pencils, either. Some things you must assume responsibility for.”

One of the most persistent visitors is *Pediculus humanus capitis*, commonly known as head lice, which exist purely to torment school nurses. I have nightmares of removing nits from hair for eternity. Every time my head itches, I rush to the mirror and examine my own scalp. (My new hair conditioner is chlorine bleach spiked with insect repellent.)

The injuries I see are unique to school health. Just to list a few:

- concussion from color guard flags
- puncture wounds from flying drills in stagecraft
- orbital fracture from missiles of wet clay
- multiple lacerations from a pet piranha

As a mother, I've always considered peanut butter my friend. That feeling persisted until I encountered a first severe peanut allergy reaction. A second highlight of that experience occurred when the first Epi-Pen malfunctioned. I have now banished peanut butter from the health room.

Some students apparently believe that the school health room offers frequent flyer awards. These students come to the health room daily, apparently expecting bonus hours, etc. Some appear at the same time daily, with the same symptoms. Occasionally, students consult with each other and diagnose their ailments prior

to arrival in the health room. “My friends think I have a fever” or “We think I have strep throat” are common examples.

Parents are clients, as well, and are often amazed by the number of visits their children make to the health room. Some, however, knowingly send their ill children to be diagnosed by the school nurse. Upon questioning, such children respond, “Mom said I should come to the nurse and see if this is a brown spider bite.”

Immunizations are a major concern for school nurses; parents seem to view this as a new concept. “You want my child to have *what* kind of shot?” is frequently heard. Children from foreign countries are supposed to be current on immunizations before entering the country. The trick is in reading the immunization record written in a foreign language.

“I have the opportunity to educate children, educators, administrators, and parents regarding healthcare needs. I have enjoyed every minute of my school nursing career, and I help mentor others as they enter the field. I learned a sense of humor is vital to the process, and wanted to share a few of my more humorous experiences.”

Here's a new concept in infectious disease: ice bags are contagious. As surely as one student in a classroom acquires an ice bag, at least three more will need them – almost immediately. Ice cures almost anything for the average student. Headaches, bumps, bruises, burns, and many other things are instantly improved with the application of ice.

I've discovered one deficiency in my preparation for this job, and that is the identification of skin rashes. I never knew there were so many varieties. Some of the most interesting ones were found to be drawn by my student patients in ink or felt-tip pen. School nurses must be flexible – and then some!

School nursing can be a satisfying vocation, providing an opportunity to “give back something” to your community. Many children experience severe challenges to their health and well-being. As a school nurse, you are entrusted with the care of our most precious national resource, our children. I collaborate with other professionals to make accommodations for children with special needs. I assist in the care of children with cancer, diabetes, asthma, seizures, and emotional/mental health issues, to name a few. 🍷

REFERENCE

Thaler, M. (1995). *The School Nurse from the Black Lagoon*. Scholastic Inc.

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