What It’s Like to Be A Camp Nurse

“I wish every nurse had to work at a camp; they’d get to experience what nursing really is.”

“. . . and then this camper camp up and asked me for a hug because it was bedtime and his mom wasn’t here.”

“Camp Nursing is the best of all worlds; time to spend with individuals who impact my life for better.”
Some nurses are naturals at camp. They enjoy campers and being outside, they want to practice nursing, and they get what Florence Nightingale meant when she wrote that a nurse’s job is to “put people in the best place for nature to work on them.”

A camp nurse spends time helping campers and staff with common human concerns: sore throats, homesickness, headache, cramps, sprained ankles, the common cold, and taking personal medications on time. Helping campers and staff cope with “simple” things should not be a blow to one’s professional esteem; rather, the camp nurse sees it for what it is – a young person developing self-care skills. The camp nurse teaches as much as s/he provides care.

Camp nurses also work with people who have chronic health problems like allergies, asthma and diabetes. The individual’s skill with self-management may need coaching from the nurse in a way that compliments the individual’s developmental stage as well as camp practices. This might mean helping a child with diabetes maintain himself in spite of s’mores at the campfire or explaining why an 8-year old camper needs a counselor to carry their EpiPen® but a 15-year old camper may not (or need it even more!).

Camp nurses champion healthy camp practices from a community health perspective. That means the nurse must be able to effectively collaborate with other camp leaders (non-nurses). Health and safety at camp won’t work if the only invested person is the nurse. There’s a way to work with others that triggers their buy-in. The camp nurse’s upbeat, can-do attitude accompanied by a style that seeks buy-in from stakeholders goes a long way at camp!
Characteristics of a Successful Camp Nurse

- Likes children and living in a child-centered environment.
- Has a sense of humor and appropriately uses it – often!
- Is adaptable; last minute changes are okay.
- Doesn’t mind ants in his/her toothbrush once in a while.
- Is comfortable going beyond the job description by taking an active part in the camp community.
- Has keen communication skills and uses them; keeps the camp director informed, actively listens to campers, shares appropriate information with other staff, and can talk effectively with parents.
- Enjoys participating; doesn’t wait for a special invitation to join in.
- Can creatively adapt nursing interventions to the camp setting.
- Is detail-minded. Can keep paperwork organized, get medications passed on time, address camper and staff health needs, and still have time and energy to participate in a camp activity or two.
- Enjoys autonomous nursing practice but also knows personal limits; consults others when needed.

This Won’t Work If . . .

- A schedule is something you expect to stick to.
- The sound of campers laughing, shouting and singing is “noise” to you.
- Interruptions in your day bring on Excedrin headaches.
- You’re only at camp because you want your child to be there.
- You expect a nine-to-five day.
- Living with no air conditioning, having mosquito bites, and going without a blow-dryer is your idea of penance.
- You’re expecting the Hilton and you get one electric outlet, no maid service, and an occasional chipmunk for a roommate.
- Taking care of sore throats, upset stomachs, sprained ankles and lonesome children insults your professional image.