A more complex world for today's school nurses

There have been many changes in and additions to their duties

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Berks County —

It's a question that elicits a smile from Ellen Grossman, and a playful roll of the eyes: What do people think you do as a school nurse?

"There are a lot of misconceptions about what we do," Grossman said, seated at the desk inside her office at Wilson West Middle School. "They think we just hand out ice bags and Band-Aids. We do that too, but there's a lot more to it."

Quips about handing out Band-Aids are common when talking to school nurses about their public perception. People tend to hold a certain view of school nurses, the nurses say, and it's one that's pretty far from the truth.

"If people work in a school they understand what we do," Grossman said. "If not, not so much."

In reality, school nurses do a lot more than deal with tummy aches and kids faking headaches to get out of gym class or a math test. It's a complicated, stressful, busy life making sure students - as well as teachers and administrators - are healthy and ready to learn.

Transitions

Dawn Schwank spent 16 years working as a nurse at Phoenixville Hospital before shifting gears and getting her school nurse certification. That
decade and a half of hospital experience, she said, provided vital training for her 22 years in the Brandywine Heights School District.

"In today's school world, you really need those clinical skills," she said. "You have to react in an instant and have that knowledge."

For the most part, school nurses are on their own. There are no other nurses in the office to bounce things off, no doctor standing by to consult with.

In Pennsylvania, school districts are required to have one certified school nurse for every 1,500 students. That means most school buildings - and sometimes even two or three - are covered by one person.

That may be the reason why so many school nurses come to the profession after stops in other nursing occupations, building their skills before taking on the challenges of a school setting.

It's the case for Cindy Willard and Carolyn Foster, school nurses in the Reading School District. Both have past lives as nurses in the intensive care unit at Reading Hospital.

And it's the case for Grossman as well, who has worked as a pediatric nurse in a Connecticut hospital and done occupational health nursing at East Penn Manufacturing Co. Inc. She said she thinks someone coming right out of nursing school would be in for a bit of a shock going straight to a school, perhaps not yet having developed the necessary skills.

"I think you have to be confident enough to work independently," she said. "You need some nursing experience. And you need to have flexibility. You're working with kids. You can't be rigid."

Wearing several hats

Foster had a bit of an edge when she decided to become a school nurse.
Her mom had done the job, and much of the rest of her family are teachers. But Foster quickly found out that things had changed since her mom's time manning the school nurse's office.

"It's completely different than what my mom did," the Reading Intermediate High School school nurse said.

Particularly working in the city school district, where students often face poverty and the litany of challenges it creates, the needs of students are diverse and often substantial, Foster said.

"This population of kids require much more than just medicine," she said. "You're not giving these kids a quick fix when they come in."

School nurses in Reading, Willard said, have to play the role not only of nurse, but of social worker and counselor and, sometimes, even parent.

In many cases, Willard and Foster said, students treat the school nurse as a primary care option. It isn't strange, they said, to have a kid who was sick all weekend come into their office on a Monday, their parents not getting them treatment and instead telling them to go to the school nurse for help.

Foster said she even once had a student who had broken a bone over the weekend and didn't have it looked at until visiting her office on a Monday. Foster contacted the student's parents and told them their kid needed to see a doctor.

Very full plates

But it's not just in the city where school nurses have seen their job responsibilities expand. Nurses in the suburbs, too, say their day-to-day schedule is becoming more and more packed.

Along with the Band-Aids and ice packs, school nurses today are dealing with increasing numbers of students with chronic illness.
"The number of diabetic students is way up," Schwank said. "One year I had six diabetics. And monitoring six adolescent diabetes cases can be a full-time job."

Schwank has to keep up to date on the ins and outs of insulin pumps, and be sure to know how to help students monitor their sugar levels.

Other issues have become more prevalent as well, Schwank said.

Concussion management, with all the recent reports about the impact on football players and other athletes, has become a "big thing," she said, as well as managing asthma.

"I have a lot more inhalers in school than I used to," she said.

Grossman said that many students with chronic illnesses wouldn't have attended traditional public schools 20 or 30 years ago. She said she's happy that has changed, but that it has placed even more on the plates of school nurses.

Things like assisting students with feeding tubes, dealing with catheters and providing respiratory treatments are things Grossman said she does now that school nurses of yesteryear likely didn't. That list also includes challenges created by the opioid epidemic, with nurses reporting that they have the anti-overdose medication Narcan on hand and have to be prepared to administer it.

**Mental health angle**

Perhaps the biggest change, however, is the amount of mental health services students require, school nurses said. While some of that falls to school counselors, mental health issues often have physical manifestations that land students in the nurse's office.

And, of course, when a counselor isn't available, a school nurse often is
called upon to intervene until a mental health professional can be brought in.

And while all of that might seem like a lot, school nurses say it's just the tip of the iceberg.

School nurses must administer all sorts of schoolwide screenings each year, for hearing and vision and scoliosis. They record every student's height and weight every year, and need to make sure students have been properly vaccinated.

They provide health education to students and, often, parents. They communicate with doctors, inform teachers about students' medical needs, craft district health policies, take part in individualized educational program meetings, manage students' allergies and have to record and track lots and lots of data.

Some nurses say they're also involved in charitable efforts, leading clothing or coat drives for students in need.

And they also answer medical questions for teachers and staff members, telling them if their sore throat should be checked by a doctor or handing out pills for a headache.

School nurses even reported staff members coming to them in search of a needle and thread to reattach a button.

"Our day is nonstop from the time we walk through the door," Willard said.

**Loving the job**

Grossman seems a touch weary when discussing all the things school nurses like her have to do, but brightens when she speaks about whom she does them for.
"I love the kids," she said. "I love working with the kids and seeing them succeed."

There are some students, usually the ones with the chronic illnesses that require extra levels of care, that Grossman sees on a daily basis. She gets to watch them move from sixth grade to eighth grade, changing from children to young adults.

"Seeing that progression is really neat," she said.

And while her job does keep her busy and can feel overwhelming at times, Grossman said she enjoys it all the same.

"It's exciting, it's fun, it's frustrating, it's unpredictable," she said. "You never know what you're going to walk into in a given moment."

Foster and Willard said much the same.

"I enjoy taking care of these kids that need guidance from somebody," Willard said.

"There's never a day of work here that you go home not helping somebody," Foster added.

For Schwank, it all boils down to something simple, something she likely shares with most of the other school nurses in Berks County and beyond. She has a compassionate nature; she has a desire to help people when she can.

That's an important part of being a nurse, she said, having that nurturing instinct, that drive to be a caregiver.

"I just enjoy taking care of the kids," she said.

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