

## RNs have role to play in reducing gang violence

Nursing graduate Clinton Baretto believes a better understanding of social justice issues will inspire young RNs to see how they can make a difference for youth.

Throughout my education, I learned many theories and philosophies about 'how' to practice nursing. Social justice, however, is the only philosophy I have adopted to guide 'where' and 'why' I practise. I believe that teaching nursing students about social justice issues will inspire a whole new generation of RNs in much the same way it has inspired me.

When I graduated from McMaster University in 2006, I left the comforts of home in an urban setting to work at Grassy Narrows First Nation reserve, north of Kenora. This reserve struggles with many of the social justice issues facing society today.

One such issue is youth violence. Although the reserve itself does not have any gangs, it is close to Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, two cities with known chapters of violent gangs. Youth from the reserve can develop gang affiliations when they visit these centres. The resulting violence on the reserve can have a devastating effect on the health and emotional well-being of the community.

Across Ontario, gang violence is receiving a great deal of media attention and is a growing concern no longer confined to major cities. This issue is an ideal example to use to teach new nurses about social justice, to help them develop an awareness of socioeconomic and political issues that impact health, and to prepare them to be advocates for change.

Gangs have a negative impact on the health of individuals in the community, both acutely through physical violence, and chronically through its psychological and social impact. Growing up in poor neighbourhoods increases the likelihood that youth will become hostile. This contributes to a negative outlook on the future, one of several traits associated with a higher risk of mental and physical illness.

Youth who join street gangs generally come from lower income families who live in neighbourhoods known for gang activity. Poor mental health and minimal parental and community supports present additional risk factors.

A fable was once written about a health-care worker on a fishing trip. He sees a body floating down the river, wades out, pulls the



Grassy Narrows RN Clinton Baretto and teacher Paul Clugston (standing, left and right, respectively) talk to high school students about health and leadership.

body in, resuscitates the victim, and sends them on their way. Soon after, another body appears, and then another, and another and so on. The health-care worker is so focused on resuscitating the victims that he dismisses the idea of going upstream to find out where they are coming from, and fixing the underlying cause.

In the case of gang violence, these bodies may be victims of gunshots, stabbings, or other sources of physical, mental, or emotional harm, that pass through various clinical settings. Nurses are often so busy dealing with the acute issues that we don't go looking for the root cause. It saddens me when politicians argue back and forth about greater gun control and policing solutions but miss the real issue of economic disparity. This is where nurses can come in, believing that holistic care and health promotion make a difference.

Nursing students who decide to pursue a career in public health and other specialties can engage in social justice advocacy by lobbying politicians, creating public support, speaking from experience, and promoting involvement in advocacy of those directly affected. Pediatric nurses can also play a role by advocating for the child they cared for who was hit by a stray bullet. Obstetrical nurses can become more vocal about the stress on mom and baby caused by living in a dangerous neighbourhood. And the list goes on.

In order to prepare young nurses to be

advocates for change, social justice must become an integral part of nursing education. In my final year of university, I had a professor who encouraged students to think beyond conventional nursing. When I delivered a seminar on youth gangs, some of my classmates struggled to accept the role social justice advocacy plays in nursing. Responses such as 'the nurse's job is at the bedside' and 'advocacy is someone else's job' showed an ingrained narrow focus of nursing.

Given these attitudes, I believe it's vital to specifically address the role of the nurse when discussing social issues. Developing this awareness throughout the education process allows students to openly critique social attitudes that contribute to poor health and encourages advocacy for social justice, both as professionals and citizens of the world.

We've all cared for patients who made us think: "If only they lived in a better area, they had more money, or a better lot in life." For these patients, we have an obligation to take on this great challenge, despite the notion that it might be a utopian dream. No single organization, agency, community group or discipline can successfully address a complex problem such as gang violence alone. But for the sake of future generations of youth in our communities, it's a challenge we must all take on. **RN**

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