

Sustainability conversations often include the common vocabulary of the Sustainable Development Goals. In this article Collins explores how one profession can make a direct impact on one of these goals. The reader is encouraged to explore what specific contributions they could make to the Sustainable Development Goals through their own profession.

SUSTAINABLE NURSING PRACTICE – HOW NURSING CAN ASSIST WITH THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC

Emma Collins

School of Nursing, Otago Polytechnic

New Zealand is ranked sixteenth on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) index identifying overall performance of OECD countries, based on 17 goals and 34 indicators (Kroll, 2015). While this shows that New Zealand is achieving well in many areas such as the gender pay gap, with one of the world's least corrupt public sectors, and accountable public institutions, this country is struggling in other areas. The report by Kroll (2015) shows that, at 31.3 percent, New Zealand has one of the highest rates of obesity in the OECD, with only Mexico and the United States scoring higher. The Ministry of Health in New Zealand also states that this country has the third highest rate of adult obesity in the OECD, and our rates are rising (MoH, 2017). In addition to this, obesity in children is highlighted as of particular concern in the New Zealand Health Strategy (2016). This document states that "obesity is becoming more common and has long-term health and social impacts." The author goes on to say that "among New Zealand children as a whole, 10 percent are obese, but the rate is 30 percent in Pacific children" (MoH, 2017).

So what is New Zealand doing about the issue of obesity in New Zealand society, among adults and children? What role can nursing have in addressing this problem?

This paper takes a brief look at the current state of obesity in New Zealand, in relation to Ministerial directions. It then discusses a number of obesity-related projects that are underway, placing this issue in the wider health context in which it is situated. The paper then moves on to place the topic in the broader nursing context before discussing possible future initiatives that nurses may be able to achieve at the local level. These suggested initiatives can be viewed as recommendations for future nursing activity.

Obesity is related to the second sustainable development goal. While this goal aims to "end hunger; achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" (UN, 2018), the epidemic of obesity is also relevant to it. The United Nations states that the world is facing a global childhood obesity epidemic, with a predicted 70 million children to be classified as obese within the next decade (UN, 2016). The same UN report goes on to state that this situation is largely the consequence of the marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages, and that the largest group affected are children from low- and middle-income countries.

There are many co-morbidities associated with obesity. The World Health Organisation (WHO) attributes 44 percent of diabetes cases and 23 percent of ischemic heart disease to sufferers being overweight, which in turn places significant strains on the health budget in most countries (Kroll, 2015). The impact of obesity on New Zealand society, and the effect that obesity can have on a person's health outcomes, is reiterated in a number of studies. A

study by Watson *et al.*, (2018) showed a number of improvements in diabetes-related and general wellbeing when participants were put on high protein diets, which resulted in weight loss which in turn improved their diabetes management. A study by Gray *et al.*, (2018) examined weight loss conversations between GPs and their patients, and found that the prevalence of such discussions is increasing. According to Stokes, Azam and Noble (2018), obesity is the most prevalent chronic preventable disease affecting Maori and Pacific Island patients. Krishnan *et al.*, (2018) found a significant association between sedentary activity and increased body-fat scores, a factor contributing to New Zealand's high rates of childhood obesity.

As these recent studies indicate, obesity is a significant health issue in New Zealand, and so a future needs to be designed where this problem is addressed and managed appropriately. But what exactly will this future look like?

In 2015 the Ministry of Health released a childhood obesity plan. This plan aims to prevent and manage obesity in children and young people up to 18 years of age through a number of initiatives (MoH, 2018). These include targeted interventions for individuals who are obese, increased support for those at risk of becoming obese, and broad approaches to make healthier choices easier for all New Zealanders. Nursing can play a key role in all of these proposed interventions. In 2018, there is a significant amount of work being undertaken to tackle the problem of obesity, in New Zealand and worldwide. It is a complex and multifaceted issue with no 'quick fix'. It is important that all potential solutions are approached holistically.

In New Zealand, the nursing workforce is the largest of all the healthcare professions. Therefore nurses have the potential to make the greatest impact on patient outcomes and the general health and wellbeing of society. The role of the nurse is changing. Nurses are becoming more proactive in working to the limits of their capacity, and some are further developing their skills to become nurse practitioners. In New Zealand, nurse practitioners are highly sought after to ensure that patients receive a comprehensive service in circumstances where care may otherwise be intermittent.

Nurses are also becoming more aware of the need to become sustainable practitioners, a concept that is evolving in nursing. One definition of sustainability through a nursing lens puts the issue thus: "Designing and delivering health care that meets today's health and health care needs of individuals and populations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own health and care needs; this requires the provision of health care that recognises and respects the dependence of our health on the earth's ecosystems, without resulting in unfair or disproportional impacts within society" (NurSus, 2015).

In 2017 the International Council of Nurses released a document titled *Nurses' Role in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*, showcasing the work that is being undertaken internationally by nurses to achieve the SDGs. For Goal 2, which is related to obesity, an example is given of a comprehensive bariatric surgery programme. According to the nurse who developed this programme, Shirley Lockie, the "[n]urse-led programme of individualised patient care lead [sic] to a tighter control on clinical assessment and enhanced clinical outcomes" (ICN, 2017). Although this is only one example, it is clear that nurses can have an instrumental role in the improvement of obesity statistics and work effectively as sustainable practitioners.

NURSING INITIATIVES

If a futuristic approach was to be taken to the Ministry of Health's initiatives to reduce childhood obesity, here is what it might look like from a nursing perspective.

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE OBESE

Nurses are already playing a key role in obesity interventions and it looks likely that they will continue to have a significant role here. The targeted interventions proposed by the Ministry of Health place nurses at the centre of this activity – as nurses are the practitioners who often identify this issue in the context of the Before School Check. Perhaps the future will see more nurses engaging with children at this level, case-managing their care and working more directly with their families and communities.

INCREASED SUPPORT FOR THOSE AT RISK OF BECOMING OBESE

For nurses to have a key role in combatting this health problem, they need to be out there facing it. Thus there needs to be a nurse in every school, seeing every child in New Zealand. This may not seem like a practical approach to sustaining the nursing workforce when there are already shortages looming, but when thinking about the reduced burden on the healthcare system for adults with obesity, and the improved health choices they could have made as children, it is a sustainable approach. Early intervention has been proven to be important for general health, and this is equally true in relation to obesity: "Failing to start interventions as early as possible is seen as missing an important opportunity for learning and favourably influencing early brain development" (Spiker, Hebbeler & Mallik, 2005, p. 310). A future where there is a nurse in every school, present every day to work with children and their families, would result in a healthier New Zealand in the long term.

MAKING HEALTHIER CHOICES EASIER FOR ALL NEW ZEALANDERS

As with its childhood obesity plan, the Ministry of Health is currently undertaking a vast programme of activities and interventions. If nursing is to play a major role in these plans, then the profession needs to have a voice and be proactive, especially in relation to sustainability issues. For example, according to the UN the marketing of unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverages is a significant contributor to the obesity epidemic (UN, 2016). Where is the nursing voice in addressing this topic at the political level? Nursing is the largest healthcare workforce in New Zealand, and we need to be visible, political and strategic in our approach. This starts at the beginning – through educating people to become nurses. Collins, Ross, Crawley and Thompson (2018) have developed a model for articulating sustainable nursing practice and addressing the need for sustainability to have a prominent place in nursing curricula. If this were to happen globally, then we would have a future-focused, sustainability-oriented nursing workforce, ready to tackle challenges such as obesity from a more holistic perspective than is the case at present.

CONCLUSION

The obesity epidemic in New Zealand is a difficult topic to discuss and tackle effectively. The Ministry of Health is committed to addressing this issue, and nursing needs to be an active and visible part of this effort. Exactly how this will be done in the future is anyone's guess. More nurses visible in schools could be one potential solution, along with other initiatives. What we do know is that New Zealand will face a significant health crisis if the childhood obesity epidemic continues to transfer into adulthood, and sufferers develop multiple obesity-related illnesses. If this happens, then New Zealand will need a significant number of additional nurses to care for these patients. The alternative is to prevent this situation from arising in the first place. Early intervention is absolutely the key to battling obesity.

Emma Collins is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Nursing with interests in sustainability, nursing informatics and research. She is currently researching the use of augmented reality in nursing education. Her clinical background is in paediatric nursing where she has a variety of community and inpatient experience, and is an area of nursing in which she is still an active practitioner.

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