The Health of Vulnerable Communities and Climate Change: Examining the Role of Public Policy and Nursing

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Introduction and Background

Global climate change is causing extreme weather events which negatively affect the health of our communities by increasing allergy seasons and respiratory diseases like asthma. The location of homes, low-income status, and race/ethnicity are among the factors that make some people more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than others. Public policy can provide useful tools for mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change and thereby supporting the health of our communities. At the same time, nursing professionals are essential to addressing the health effects of climate change because they provide members of vulnerable communities with immediate care in the short-term. Knowing how climate change contributes to individual and community poor health and health disparities can deepen the contextual knowledge of increases in illness, and widen the perspective of illness, empathy and compassion.

Questions

How might an understanding of climate change help public policy makers and nurses improve the public health experience of communities and patients?

Public Policy and Climate Change

Community participation improves research design and increases response rates; furthermore, engaging vulnerable communities can lead to more widespread application in the community as a whole. Such as:

- Collaborate with community residents including low-income, elderly, the ill, and communities classified as vulnerable to the effects of climate change-related illnesses (West and East Oakland and Oakland Chinatown).
- Community workshops were held and participants were asked to brainstorm public policies solutions.
- As a result, community-based adaptation strategies were developed into city planning and local public policy.
- Oakland is an example of how we can use community input from all members when making local policies so that we can make our policies practical.
- Residents also feel more engaged with their community which motivates them to apply the cities’ policies.

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Nursing and Climate Change

The environment essentially comes into the body of the individual meaning that our bodies are not exclusive of the environment and that both human and non-human factors interact and produce both healthy and unhealthy bodies:

- Understanding vulnerability seeps into a nurses’ field because there are causes to their patient’s condition that are not confined to what one would normally think such as diet and exercise.
- Resilience emphasizes the need for nurses to understand that when patients present themselves with various health conditions, they may be strong individuals yet come from backgrounds that involve constant struggling such as working multiple jobs to make ends meet.
- Struggling causes them inevitable stress, time constraints possibly preventing them from adequate exercise, and overall poor care of their bodies.
- Nurses are capable of helping community members cope with climate change through patient care.
- International Council of Nurses states nurses must be involved in developing national action plans and policies as well as disaster preparedness teams.
- ICN encourages developing nursing skills by continuous learning in order to adapt to environmental changes caused by climate change.

Glossary

Vulnerability: Due to factors such as social class, race, income, and location of residence, an individuals may be more susceptible to extreme weather events caused by climate change.

Resilience: An individual may be more capable or stronger than others to cope with extreme weather events due to the fact that they can utilize their limited resources.

Mitigation: Directly reducing our contribution to climate change such as reducing greenhouse gases (GHG).

Adaptation: System’s ability to adjust and reduce vulnerability to effects of climate change.

References


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