

School nurses treat policies along with kids

The duties of a school nurse go far beyond dispensing Tylenol or bandaging a scraped knee.

Today's school nurses track reports of potential pandemics, evaluate environmental hazards, review school policies, follow a dizzying array of regulations, and educate parents, faculty and students about health issues. And yes, bandage a knee when needed.

Lori Anderson, a nurse at Notre Dame Preparatory School, Towson, said school nurses "are a kind of public health representative and liaison between families and here. We're the eyes and ears of what's going on in public health."

She regularly surfs the Center for Disease Control's Web site on emerging diseases.

"Pandemics are a big deal for schools," she explained, "because one out of every five people in the United States is connected with a school." Schools are a key place to limit the spread of disease, and nurses evaluate policies to do just that.

But nurses also work with maintenance staff to see if cleaning supplies or methods pose a more immediate threat - or a threat to a child with allergies.

"There are some pretty significant allergies out there, and that's something we're always aware of."

Ms. Anderson said the most common ailment she treats is headaches, but many of those headaches are tied to lifestyle issues. Teens don't get enough sleep and don't eat or drink properly in the morning.

"Migraines are common in teenagers because their hormones are fluctuating," she added.

Then there are the odder moments. Ms. Anderson recalls one girl who was crouched down in the hallway in considerable pain, unable to move.

“She had just gotten a charley horse, and she was stuck in that position,” she said. “At the end of it she was laughing, but everyone around her was befuddled.”

Thanks to newer medications with long-term dosing, nurses administer less prescription medications. However, school rules require them to dispense all over-the-counter medications, and “we have diabetics whom we oversee,” Ms. Anderson said.

And they spend more time making sure vaccinations are current, since more are required now.

Infections are more problematic, too. School nurses track those as well because they’re becoming resistant to antibiotics. And whenever you have a teenage population, eating issues are a concern.

Nurses also help children with injuries or illnesses adapt to the school building, and they monitor children with chronic illnesses – and all in compliance with new HIPPA regulations to protect patient privacy. They work with coaches and trainers to safeguard student-athletes, and they offer support for the science department’s health-related lessons.

Nurses also educate students about living well and coping with stress.

“Their lifestyles are very busy – there’s a lot of pressure to do well and prepare for college,” Ms. Anderson said. A veteran of 25 years in pediatrics, she loves nursing in a Catholic school, where she can work with the religion department to relate spiritual growth to overall health. She’ll pray with students about their health or read the Bible with them.

“There are some Bible passages that are very calming and soothing,” she said.