

**Voices of Students**

As students of nursing, it is relatively easy to lose our ‘peripheral vision’ and become focused on the new procedures, techniques and therapies we are expected to learn in the clinical setting to achieve the learning goals of an academic program. As we scurry around, trying to make up for our status as novices in a new and challenging clinical environment, we observe veteran nurses, absorb what we see around us, and try to imbibe as much new information as we possibly can. With such an inundation of new information, it is very possible to forget that the walls of the clinical setting are as expansive as the farthest reaches of the globe. It is possible to misremember that the walls of clinics are permeable, and that the patients whom we see – their illnesses, stressors, and concerns are a reflection of the well-being of our communities. It is also possible to forget that as nurses and health practitioners, we too must ourselves pay attention to the sensitive and ordered world of nature, from the level of the ecosystem down to the most miniscule level of our own anatomy. It is possible for all of us to impact wellness and illness, individually and collectively – for ourselves, our families, and for the ecosystems which make life possible by helping to facilitate research and the dissemination of information between health and environmental sciences disciplines.

As students we are in contact with a plethora of information, from lectures to the articles we read for class, to the variety of newsletters and meetings we can attend in our clinical sites. While in my nursing program, I built upon my background in Environmental Sciences (a previous Bachelor’s degree), and elected to sit in on Waste Management meetings at the major academic hospital where my clinical site was. I was generally concerned about how waste streams were managed post-hospital, was interested in the regulatory stipulations guiding the

hospital, and was further intrigued by how all of that impacted the daily care and actions of nurses. To gain entry to the Waste Management meeting, I set up an informational meeting with the Industrial Hygienist and indicated my interest in joining the meeting. Not only was he helpful in facilitating my visit to numerous meetings (which also included staff from the Environmental Services Department), but he also was very informative in his discussion about how the hospital waste systems worked, and what the current challenges to improvement had been. This learning process was very enlightening, and enabled me to understand some of the gaps in the ‘greening’ process in that institution. I was better able to see some of the obstacles in the policy, communications, and financial spheres which seemed to be slowing progress.

At my university, I also advocated to have my senior clinical rotation in the Occupational Medicine clinic, where I could better understand how systems outcomes lead to injury and work place exposures. I attended the ‘journal club’ with the Occupational Medicine residents, and read the associated articles. Since work systems and waste systems are intimately connected, this approach to self-education was very useful for getting an overview of how environmental health related concerns were being managed in the hospital. I then also coordinated informational interviews with the Executive Director of Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) in Arlington, VA, and met several times with the head of the local HCWH chapter in Philadelphia to gain a better understanding about how hospitals were working to enhance their ‘greening’ and the various strategies which had been effective. I also attended a ‘greening hospitals’ conference (hosted by the local HCWH chapter in partnership with other local health care entities), which further helped me to understand the various individuals and departments involved in ‘greening’ such as building engineers, purchasers, and safety officers. With the help of my nurse preceptor, I attended a Quality Assurance meeting attended by top administrators, and further was able to

attend a half-day conference on Patient Safety. All of these experiences helped to inform me about ‘the system-ness’ of the hospital and how ‘greening’ efforts must touch all levels of the ‘system’ in order to have a true impact.

As a part of my senior coursework (‘leadership seminar course’), we were asked to write a letter to advocate for something in a ‘real way’ and directed towards an individual appropriate to our topic and cause. Though not a course requirement, I elected to mail mine in actuality. I chose to write a letter to advocate for the establishment of a ‘Green Team’ at the hospital where I had had my clinical experience. I directed my letter to the Chief Operating Officer, and in it included case examples of other sister institutions which had successfully implemented ‘greening’ strategies, quoted financial savings garnered by other similar institutions which had elected to ‘green’ their processes, and included research evidence indicating the potential for patient and nurse exposures in the workplace to chemicals such as di-(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate. I further included links to the Healthcare Without Harm website and ‘Green Team’ ‘how to’ documents.

Since I have continued to stay abreast of the progress in the Waste Management meetings via the Industrial Hygienist who was originally so helpful to my learning, I was also ecstatic to learn through him that the Chief Operating Officer has recently authorized the formation of a ‘Green Team’ at the hospital. While I cannot claim credit for this development, I do know that my efforts to better understand the particular individuals and system issues faced by this hospital, and my efforts to understand the many complexities faced by such a large institution contributed to the effectiveness of my letter, and allowed me to write in a meaningful manner. The letter I wrote to the Chief Operations Officer may have represented only one of a thousand voices

advocating for a 'Green Team' – but it was the informed voice of a student nurse. As students we  
can each target the use our voices to effectively advocate for the improvement of hospital  
settings for patients and practitioners, and by contributing our voices, we can be a growing part  
of the movement to 'green' health care.