

# Public Health Nursing Education in Puerto Rico<sup>1</sup>

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THE EVOLUTION of public health nursing education in Puerto Rico has been closely associated with the development of the public health unit in the Island. As the various public health activities were initiated, preliminary training for each new type of service was given to the nurses by the teaching personnel available at the time.

*The Red Cross:* Pioneer work in public health nursing was developed under the Puerto Rico chapter of the American Red Cross.<sup>2</sup> When activities were being planned for Children's Year in 1920, the American Red Cross agreed to send a supervisory nurse to Puerto Rico. Accordingly, Miss Kathleen D'Ollier<sup>3</sup> was appointed Director of the Nursing Service, introducing into Puerto Rico, mothers' and children's conferences, visiting nursing, and other phases of public health work.

The first baby clinic was opened in May, 1921, in the building of the municipal pharmacy in Puerta de Tierra.<sup>4</sup> The supervising nurse, with limited facilities at her command, trained the nurses assigned to this service, in the essentials of public health nursing. Prenatal clinics were later established. Regular follow-up home visits were made by the nurses for the purpose of instructing mothers in the elements of child care and the preparation of infant feedings. Home visits to the families of tuberculous patients were inaugurated in San Juan by a nurse especially prepared for this type of work.<sup>5</sup>

Clinics similar to those in San Juan were established in other towns of the Island, with nurses previously trained in Puerta de Tierra. The municipalities, the Puerto Rico Junior Red Cross, the American Red Cross, and the Insular Department of Health shared in the maintenance of this program, the last named providing the nurses and medical assistance required. The nursing service remained

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1. Presented at the first annual meeting of the Puerto Rico Public Health Association, September 23, 1941; received for publication December 5, 1941.

2. Helen V. Bary, *Child Welfare in the Insular Possessions of the United States*. Part I: "Porto Rico." (U. S. Children's Bureau Publication, Washington, D. C.)

3. Pablo Berga, "Historical Sketch of the Work of the Red Cross in Puerto Rico." Inauguration of the Chapter House, American Red Cross. Puerto Rico Chapter, August 18, 1935, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

4. Bary, *op. cit.*

5. *Ibid.*

under the direction of the Red Cross supervising nurse, who continued to assist and guide the nurses in their various activities.

Recognizing the many social and economic problems encountered by the nurses in their follow-up visits, the American Red Cross initiated and organized family case work in San Juan in 1921. As no organized relief was available, it was found necessary to restrict the work to those families which were under the supervision of the mothers' and infants' clinics of the Red Cross.<sup>6</sup>

A successful vacation camp for 100 children, selected by the Red Cross Nursing Service, was conducted by the Junior Red Cross. The able director of this camp, Miss Beatriz Lasalle, was assisted by other interested school teachers.<sup>7</sup>

The Red Cross thus laid the foundation for the education of personnel in the development of subsequent public health nursing and social service programs throughout Puerto Rico.

*The Insular Department of Health:* The effectiveness of the work accomplished under the direction of the Red Cross supervising nurse was recognized by the Insular Department of Health and plans were laid for the organization of a more extensive maternal and child health and welfare program. Accordingly, in 1923, the following services were established under the newly created Bureau of Social Welfare: prenatal clinics, infant hygiene clinics, public health nursing, and social service.<sup>8</sup> Two divisions were created within the bureau, namely, the Public Health Service, under the direction of a superintendent of nurses, and the Social Service, under a social service worker. Recognition of the importance of education is indicated in the selection of the directors of these two services, who are described as, "women who have received special preparation in their respective branches and who were brought from the United States for the express purpose of instructing and directing the nurses and agents of social investigation, employed in this important part of public health work."<sup>9</sup>

In 1923, when prenatal and infant clinics were established in the health centers, under the Department of Health, the first public health nurses were designated as *enfermeras visitantes*, i.e., visiting nurses. They were instructed and directed by Miss Sara Lane,<sup>10</sup>

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Informe Anual del Comisionado de Sanidad al Gobernador de Puerto Rico, Año Fiscal de 1923-1924. San Juan, P. R., 1925.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

Superintendent of the Visiting Nursing Service. A training course of one month was given at the Red Cross Station in Puerta de Tierra. The course of instruction, approved by the Department of Health and the American Red Cross, included theoretical and field work.<sup>11</sup>

In 1923 prenatal and infant clinics were established in health centers in Santurce, then in San Juan, Puerta de Tierra, and Barrio Obrero. A year later seven other health centers were functioning in various parts of the Island. Two public health nurses were employed in each center. Joint supervisory visits were made by the chief of the Bureau of Social Medicine and Child Welfare, the superintendent of the Visiting Nursing Service, and the superintendent of the Social Service. This supervision consisted chiefly of an inspection, instructions to doctors and nurses, and a study of localities for the future establishment of new health centers. At this time twenty-seven public health nurses were employed.

In 1924 the Bureau of Tuberculosis was established, with dispensaries in San Juan, Santurce, and Ponce. Sixteen public health nurses were assigned to this bureau, giving part-time service to the social hygiene and welfare clinics.

In 1926 a movement was begun to convert the health centers into municipal health units, under the control of a public health officer. As a result, Dr. E. Garrido Morales was assigned by the Commissioner of Health to organize the first municipal health unit in Río Piedras, to which a full-time health officer was appointed. Two public health nurses, and soon after a third, assisted in the activities of the unit, which included public health education, control of communicable disease, child hygiene, including medical inspection of schools, prenatal, infant, and pre-school clinics, and follow-up visits in the home.<sup>12</sup>

The following year a health unit was similarly organized in Yabucoa, and two public health nurses who had received training in the Río Piedras unit, were assigned to the staff.

Reorganization within the Department of Health during this period left the public health nurses without a sufficiently qualified and experienced director, which resulted in a lack of sound training

11. Parallel with public health nursing, social service was developed under the Department of Health. In 1924 Miss Nellie Foster, recommended by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, was appointed Superintendent of Social Service Investigation, and established a course of training in social work. Social service workers were thus made available for the public health program as it was developed.

12. Report of the Commissioner of Health of Porto Rico to the Governor of Porto Rico for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1927. San Juan, P. R., 1929.

for nurses entering the field and frequent changes in the nursing personnel of the department. To assist in overcoming these difficulties, an instructor in public health nursing was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1928, for the training and supervision of public health nurses, and a successful and experienced public health nurse was selected to assist in the teaching program. During this period it was found advisable to change the location of the training center at various intervals. Accordingly, the training center has functioned in the health units of Arecibo, Caguas, Ponce, and San Germán, as well as in Río Piedras.

*Postgraduate study:* The rapid growth of public health units from twenty in the year 1934, to the thirty-five central units and fifty-one sub-units, serving every municipality of the Island at the present time, has necessitated an equally rapid increase in the public health nursing personnel. One hundred and eighty-three nurses are now employed in the public health units in addition to the 143 nurses serving in the maternal and infant hygiene, tuberculosis, and venereal disease bureaus, and the rural medical dispensaries.

Along with this increasing demand for public health nurses in Puerto Rico has come the request for better preparation of such nurses. From 1932 to 1938 eight fellowships were granted by the Rockefeller Foundation for advanced study in public health nursing in the United States and Canada. Seven of these nurses are now public health nursing instructors, acting in the capacity of supervisors and assisting with the in-service training of the staff nurses. Two nurses have recently returned to Puerto Rico after a year of special study, through funds made available by the United States Children's Bureau, to assume the duties of nurse consultants in maternal and child hygiene.

In January, 1940, a Department of Public Health was inaugurated at the School of Tropical Medicine in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Ten public health nurses, carefully selected upon the basis of academic preparation and satisfactory service in the public health units, were enrolled for a course leading to a certificate in public health nursing. Nine months are devoted to classroom and laboratory instruction, and three months to field practice in Río Piedras. The content of the course exceeds that of many similar courses offered in the United States, and perhaps the greatest advantage to the student is the opportunity afforded for interpreting and applying the knowledge gained to the public health situations in Puerto Rico. Students will not have to struggle with unfamiliar conditions in a foreign environ-

ment, they will not be required to readjust and adapt newly attained methods to the local situation, when they complete their year's studies and return to the public health units; they will be prepared to give better service to the community, for not only have they acquired the basic knowledge and the essentials of public health nursing, but also they have been guided in the interpretation and application of these fundamentals in the terms of Puerto Rico.

*Preliminary instruction:* The preliminary instruction in public health nursing is now being given in the public health unit in Río Piedras, and covers a period of two months. In addition to the instruction given by the head nurse of the demonstration area, lectures and demonstrations by the health officer and members of the various bureaus of the Department of Health are included in the course. Practical experience in clinics, school health work, and home visiting form an important part of the preliminary education in public health nursing.

*Refresher courses:* Public health nurses who have been separated from the service for a period of time are sent to the training center in Río Piedras before being reassigned to the public health units. The instructor in public health nursing determines the amount and type of instruction and field experience necessary to prepare these nurses to reassume the duties of public health work. Likewise, nurses whose public health work is not entirely satisfactory are given an opportunity to receive additional instruction and guidance at Río Piedras in order that they may improve their services in the public health units to which they have been assigned.

*In-service training:* The addition of the chief supervising nurse to the Department of Health has greatly advanced the in-service training of supervisors and staff nurses. Regular monthly meetings of the supervisors are being held. Problems are discussed in the morning and educational programs are carried on in the afternoon, with members of the different bureaus of the Health Department participating. The supervisors, in turn, hold regular meetings of the staff nurses in their respective districts, with the chief supervising nurse attending.

*Public health courses in schools of nursing:* The demand for public health nurses is increasing daily. Practically no trained public health nurse is now unemployed, and delay in filling positions is necessarily caused by the required period of preliminary training. It would facilitate matters greatly if education in public health nursing could be included in the schools of nursing throughout the Island. This is

not possible in many cities and towns on the continent because of the lack of satisfactory affiliation facilities in public health nursing organizations. Such facilities are not lacking in Puerto Rico, for the public health nursing service is under one organization and the same methods prevail in all health units. With the increasing number of well-prepared public health nurses available, it would be possible to establish several training centers in conveniently located public health units. Small groups of senior students could be sent from the schools of nursing for a two-month period, receiving public health training similar to that given at present in Río Piedras. Thus, in a few years, all graduate nurses would have had sufficient training to work under close supervision in the public health units. In the past it has been noted that responsible institutional positions are invariably offered to nurses who have had public health training and experience. Apparently, they give more satisfactory service after such training, so it would seem that, even though the hospitals will continue to absorb the majority of graduate nurses, the inclusion of a public health nursing course in the curriculum of the nursing school would improve the graduate nursing staff of the hospital. With the present trend to include public health education in all phases of medical and nursing care, Puerto Rico could be among the first to prepare adequately all future training school graduates to meet these increasing responsibilities in their professional services.