

HEALTH EDUCATION NEEDS OF THE YOUTH

VEHLIA DE JONG

OPSOMMING

Weens goeie algemene gesondheid kom die adolessent dikwels nie met die gesondheidsorgstelsel in aanraking nie. Adolessente het egter baie gesondheidsvoorligtingsbehoefte waaraan daar nie voldoen word nie.

Adolessente het verskeie volwassewordingstake om te verrig en ten opsigte van hul voorligtingsbehoefte moet die mens as geheel, asook sy omgewing, in ag geneem word. Daarom behoort voorligting aan die jeug fisiese, sielkundige, geestelike, omgewings- en maatskaplike gesondheid in te sluit.

Adolessente bied aan ons 'n uitdaging om hulle in hul oorgangsfase vanaf kind na volwassene te ondersteun en verpleegkundiges behoort hierdie gesondheidsvoorligtingsuitdaging te aanvaar.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation has declared that the year 1985 is the International Year of the Youth — youth being defined as the young people in the thirteen to twenty-four-year age group. This age group often escapes contact with the medical and nursing professions because of their general good health and therefore minimal need for medical care. However, the youth in South Africa, both Black and White, do have health educational needs that are to a large degree neglected and unmet.

Youth is a period of time in which rapid changes occur in the young person. There is a gradual withdrawing from the parents and working towards achieving their own adult identity. The end result of adolescence or youth is for the young person to make his own way in the world and to choose a partner with whom to begin a new family.

It has been said that the youth have five maturational tasks to complete (Mitchell, 1980) namely:

- **work task** — preparation for the part he will play in the world of work
- **peer group task** — developing a social role which is satisfying for him and his peers. Few young people get through youth without at some time feeling lonely and isolated

This article won first prize in the category for student, pupil or enrolled nurses or nursing assistants in the 1985 Johnson and Johnson-Curationis Writing Competition. The topic was "Nursing the Youth" and entries had to be either a case study or a review on one or more of the contemporary health education needs of the youth.

- **mastering newly acquired sex drives**
- **mastering increasing aggression**
- **resolving the independence-dependence dilemma** — often the young person is separated from the adult by boarding school or University and so is independent from the adult but in many ways, especially financially, they are still dependent on the adult.

Health has been defined by the World Health Organisation as a *state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*. Katherine Mansfield defined health by saying *By health I mean the power to live a full adult breathing life in close contact with what I love. I want to be all that I am capable of becoming* (Clark, 1983).

Health and illness is understood and reacted to differently by different cultures. Culture comprises ways in which people in different societies and groups understand the world and interpret experience.

Culture is handed down from one generation to the next by the process of socialisation.

In South Africa, the author believes, there exists a situation of *culture-shock* amongst the Blacks since most young Black South Africans have grown up in urban townships in close contact with Western civilisation and its beliefs, norms, values and attitudes which are very different from rural African cultures. Therefore, many of the illnesses and health educational needs of the various groups in South Africa are the same, yet the methods of education will differ to some degree.

In reviewing the contemporary health educational needs of the youth it is important to consider the whole person and his environment. Much ill health results from individual and freely chosen patterns of behaviour and life styles. Health education of the youth should therefore include education in physical health, mental health, spiritual health, environmental health, social health and nutritional health.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

When considering physical health it is important to be aware of the physical changes that occur in youth. In girls there is the development of breasts, the change in fat distribution and skeletal growth which includes widening of the hips. Menstruation begins at about eleven to thirteen years of age.

Boys increase in height and shoulder girth. There is also a generalised musculature development, deepening of the voice and an increase in the length of the penis with the production of active spermatozoa in the seminal fluid by the age of fourteen. It is well worth noting that Africans develop earlier than Caucasians and are therefore sexually mature at a younger age than Caucasians.

One of the major tasks which the youth have to complete is mastering of their newly acquired sex drive. The young person has to develop his or her adult sexual identity. The young person works towards a feeling of freedom to choose a partner of the opposite sex with whom they can have a mutually satisfying genital and intimate social relationship (Mitchell, 1980).

The increasing availability of oral contraceptives has led to a vast increase in premarital sexual relationships so that by the age of eighteen few of today's adolescents are sexually inexperienced. The increase in sexual freedom has also led to an increase in sexually transmitted diseases and the rate of gonorrhoea in particular, is rising. There is also an increase in unwanted pregnancies among unmarried girls despite the availability of oral contraceptives.

Therefore there is a great need for the youth to be supported and helped to master their newly acquired sex drives. The child, about to enter youth, should be taught about the physical changes that occur at puberty. Menstruation and the physiology of reproduction should also be taught. Educators should include the parents, the church, the schoolteacher and the nurse.

Another important aspect of physical health in youth is the problem of acne. In this regard hygiene is essential and all aspects of hygiene can again be emphasised. Possible causes and treatment of acne should also be expounded on and the young person supported psychologically, especially if acne is severe.

The most prevalent illness in youth is glandular fever and so the young person needs to be taught the cause of the disease, the signs and symptoms, the treatment and, above all, the prevention of glandular fever.

Sport injuries also bring the young person into contact with the medical team. Education about measures to prevent sport injuries could therefore be useful to the young sportsman.

Since prevention is better than cure, girls should be taught breast self-examination to ensure early detection of breast carcinoma and lumps.

MENTAL HEALTH

A large number of factors influence mental health. These factors include:

- biological and physiological factors
- psychological
- environmental
- social influences
- adequate housing
- full employment
- education
- successful interpersonal relationships.

One of the conditions most prevalent amongst youth is acute depressive illness. This depressive state could result from the conflicts within the young person resulting from trying to succeed in the maturational tasks mentioned earlier. The young person needs an increasing amount of psychological support, especially from parents. Parents often feel confused and inadequate to cope with the strains of youth and would probably benefit from help by professional people who deal with the youth.

Mental health is often a reflection of the individuals' total health, his attitude towards himself and his environment. The better educated a young person is, the more successful he sees himself, the better able he is to adapt, and the better will be the interpersonal relationships he enjoys. When his environment, social influences and employment are healthy, there is a greater chance of him being mentally healthy as well.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Spiritual health is an integral part of the total care of any individual and especially of the youth who finds himself continually seeking purpose in life. Youth is a period of time when the young person seeks to know life — what it is and what it involves.

Although he seeks a purpose in life the young person often steers away from the church and from

God and tries to find God in the worldly things outside the church. The university student is confronted with issues of justice and injustice and is continually bombarded with man's importance and achievements. Often spiritual conflicts result in physical, emotional or mental ill health and this must be borne in mind and investigated when dealing with young people.

The young person finds meaning and purpose in life when he recognises the existence and the presence of God and he begins to strive after ethical and moral standards.

It has been said that when God created mankind, He left a space that only He could fill and until God fills that space in the individual he cannot know peace and harmony.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Today the young person in South Africa is growing up in a highly technological environment which influences him. The most common cause of death in the youth is motor vehicle accidents and especially motorcycle accidents.

The highly technological environment has also led to an increase in urbanisation among the Black population. This has resulted in overcrowding in townships with inadequate housing and water supplies and illnesses of the poor being rife among them. There is also bitterness in the Black youth when he sees the social and political advantages of his White counterpart.

Pollution, especially that of the air by large factories, is another problem that threatens the environmental health of the young person. Occupational hazards are another environmental threat to health.

A health care worker has a large responsibility when it comes to environmental health, especially in a large city such as Johannesburg with its large number of cars emitting carbon monoxide and its factories which pump out large volumes of smoke into the air which thousands of South Africans then have to breathe. Prevention of such pollution should be emphasised to the youth of today so that there may be a healthy youth of tomorrow.

Continued on p. 56