

Applying Research to Practice

Practical Guidelines for Occupational Health Nurses

by Mary K. Salazar, EdD, RN, COHN-S
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Effective nursing practice relies on the continued generation of knowledge through the conduct of scholarly research. Occupational health nursing research consists of a systematic investigation of occupational health and safety issues affecting workers and worker populations. Numerous examples of occupational health nursing contributions to research exist in the literature, many of which are published in the *AACNPN Journal*. The American Association of Occupational Health Nurses (AAOHN) describes the foundation of occupational health nursing practice as research based, and Standard 3 of the professional standards states the

Occupational and environmental health nurse uses research findings in practice and contributes to the scientific base in occupational and environmental health nursing to improve practice and advance the profession (AAOHN, 1999).

According to the American Nurses Association (1997), all nurses must contribute to research for the profession to meet its mandate to society for effective and efficient care. This contribution might consist of identifying work related health or safety problems, collecting and analyzing data, or implementing programs based on research findings.

The primary purpose of this article is to describe how occupational health nurses can effectively use research in their practice. This article describes the evolution of nursing as a science, demonstrates the relevance and importance of scientific inquiry in advancing nursing disciplines, and provides that can be used to identify and critique literature with potential to support occupational health nursing practice.

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THE SCIENCE OF NURSING

Although Florence Nightingale established nursing as a discipline in the 1850s, it was a full century before nursing was defined as a science. In the 1950s, several nursing scientists determined that for nursing to become a viable profession, it must develop scientifically based theories and establish a scientific foundation through research. Inevitably, the first step in defining nursing as a science was to examine the work of Nightingale and to develop clarity about the essential elements underpinning Nightingale's nursing role. As a result of that first step, early nursing theorists determined nursing consisted of four primary concepts: person, environment, health, and nursing. In subsequent years, these concepts guided nursing scholarship development, including the development of nursing theories and research. Aguro (2001) describes these concepts in terms of occupational health nursing as follows:

- **Person**—recipient of care: working aged adults and their families.
- **Environment**—physical, sociocultural, organizational, political, economic, and interpersonal surroundings.
- **Health**—reflected by worker's ability to be healthy and safe in the work environment. Threats to health are work related injuries and illnesses, or disabling conditions that might limit one's ability to work or be worsened by work.
- **Nursing activities**—actions deliberately designed for the support of care. Occupational health nurses implement interventions specific to workers and worker populations.

Nursing, as a science, has made substantial progress since the 1950s. Nursing science has provided a professional foundation for the discipline of nursing; nursing theory and research have provided new insights and understanding of the complex interrelationships affecting human health. Research is now considered absolutely essential to the ongoing advancement of nursing practice, and has resulted in nursing's recognition as a well established discipline with a strong scientific base. As a subspecialty in nursing, occupational health nursing also defines itself in terms of its scientific underpinnings. In addition to nursing science, occupational health nursing incorporates a body of

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