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EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Camp nursing: A unique opportunity for nurses

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ABSTRACT

Camp nursing is a specialty area that offers nurses an opportunity to apply clinical judgment skills in a unique environment. This non-traditional setting can be a great fit for nurses looking to expand their skill set and gain new perspectives. In this article, we will discuss essential components of camp nursing that can be insightful for interested nurses. These include finding the right camp, the day-to-day functions of what camp nurses do, the importance of self-care, and personal reflections from two nurse educators who currently work as camp nurses.

Key Words: Camp nursing, Self-care, Nurse, Role overview

1. Introduction

According to the American Camp Association,^[1] there are thousands of camps across the United Stated hosting an estimated 26 million children and adolescents each year. The camp experience can be one that offers unique and enriching opportunities for children of all ages.^[2] The type of camp setting can vary, with some focused on special medical or psychological needs such as asthma or diabetes, while other camps are tailored for more adventure and discovery. Regardless of the camp setting, medical personnel are an essential component in ensuring the overall health and wellbeing of the campers and staff.

Camp nursing is a specialty area that offers opportunities for nurses to apply their clinical judgment skills, gain new competencies and knowledge, and care for diverse individuals.^[3] Camp nurses provide care to both children and staff members in an environment that is rewarding, yet challenging. Due to the unique opportunities this field of nursing presents, it

is important that nurses become familiar with the roles and expectations of camp nurses. This article will share essential components of camp nursing, including the day-to-day functions of camp nurses, and provide insights and helpful resources from two nurse educators who currently work in this field. This article will also share the unique benefits a camp experience can provide for specific groups like nurse educators, nursing students and specialty nursing areas.

2. GETTING STARTED

Nurses interested in pursuing employment at a summer camp may not know where to begin. There are several factors that need to be considered when thinking about applying for staff positions. First, one needs to determine the time commitment they are prepared to give. A majority of sleep-away camps will vary from one-week to four-week sessions, and multiple sessions may be offered by a camp throughout the summer. Some nurses may work just one session, giving them more freedom with their schedule, while others will plan to spend

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their entire summer taking care of campers. If circumstances allow, some nurses may be able to bring their own children to camp, which could be another determining factor regarding the time commitment desired.

Other factors nurses interested in camp nursing may want to consider include the type of camp and location, the camper/staff ratios, the length of the contract expected, and pay. The number of campers in attendance will vary between camps and different sessions, but could be anywhere from 120-400, not including staff members. Camps following recommendations from the American Camp Association may have camper/staff ratios of 1:6 for younger campers and 1:10 for older campers. The healthcare staff to camper ratio will depend on several variables, including the anticipated needs of the camper population, the type and volume of healthcare services needed, and the distance of the camp from medical and emergency services.

A camp nurse's length of contract can range from one week to 8 weeks. Those looking for a contract over 2 weeks should be sure to ask about time-off included in the contract. The camp nurse contracts typically include coverage for housing and meals for the summer as well. According to advertisements posted online, camp nurses could expect to make \$1,200-\$1,500 a week on average. Additional considerations related to the nursing role may include, if there is a camp doctor on staff and their availability, and what the sleeping quarters will be like. These are just a few factors nurses need to keep in mind when exploring camp nursing opportunities, but based on the specific camp other things may need to be considered.

A good recommendation for anyone interested in camp nursing is to reach out to someone who has worked in this setting. Being able to communicate with a nurse who has experienced this unique specialty firsthand can be extremely valuable. Connecting with the administrative team of the potential camp of interest is also a great way to get specific questions answered and usually occurs prior to or when being interviewed for the position. Social media platforms now have online pages dedicated to assisting individuals considering camp nursing.

It is critical that the nurse knows the scope of practice for the state in which the camp is located. Many states are included in the Nurse Licensure Compact program which allows nurses who have a multistate license to practice in those participating states without having to apply for a license in that state. This is great for camp nurses and allows for flexibility. Another benefit of the multistate license is not having to keep up with licensure requirements in two or more states, but only your state of primary residence.

3. CAMP NURSING RESOURCES

Nurses who are interested in camp nursing may want to explore several resources to prepare for the role. The two main resources are the Alliance for Camp Health (ACH) and the American Camp Association (ACA). The ACH provides several online courses ranging from an introduction to camp nursing to diabetes management at camp. The ACA has informative articles and online courses as well. Another good resource may be the book, Camp Nursing: The Basics and Beyond by Erceg and Gaslin. Additional resources a camp nurse may find helpful can be found on the American Academy of Pediatrics website such as specific treatment for common skin disorders and the Centers for Disease Control for best practices regarding communicable diseases like norovirus or COVID-19.

4. CAMP NURSING ROLE OVERVIEW

The camp nurse generally functions under the supervision of an administrative team. The team may consist of other nurses and healthcare professionals, but also includes non-medical personnel that are well-versed in camp operations and management. The camp nurse will collaborate with both medical and non-medical supervisors to make decisions that are best for the campers and the camp as a whole.

4.1 Infirmary

A large portion of the time spent for the healthcare staff is in the infirmary. The camp infirmary is a special place that operates differently at each camp based on that camp's unique needs. Infirmaries may house sick campers and needed supplies. They are stocked with emergency supplies like epinephrine, automated external defibrillators (AEDs), and with commonly used over-the-counter medications based on standing orders like acetaminophen, ibuprofen, antacids, swimmer's ear drops, hydrocortisone, antihistamines and much more. Some of the other items you might find in the infirmary are a variety of band aids, ace wraps, tape, splints, tweezers for removing splinters and certain dental tools for orthodontic needs at camp. It is important the camp infirmary is well stocked with all the needed supplies prior to the first camp session.

4.2 General nursing tasks

The nursing role at camp consists of common nursing tasks as well as several that might be new to most nurses. Some camps may only cater to healthy children while others may specifically cater to children with special needs. Nursing tasks may vary depending on the camp population. For example, a camp catering to diabetic campers will require nursing staff who are familiar with diabetes management including new equipment and technologies such as continuous

glucose monitoring devices.

Typical nursing activities at camp include assessment and evaluation of camper complaints, illnesses and injuries, medication administration, delegation of care to counselors or other infirmary staff and documentation. Some examples of unfamiliar nursing tasks may include preparing first aid bags, orthodontic interventions, food allergy management, tick checks, lots of nights on-call and many parent phone calls.

Camp nurses will see many campers and staff members throughout the day for evaluation and treatment of minor complaints and less frequently more serious illness and injuries. The number of campers and staff seen varies depending on the size of the camp. For example, for a camp with around 150 campers and 60 staff the camp nurses may see anywhere from 20-70 campers/staff. These visits may include new complaints, follow-ups or serious illness or injury. Frequent complaints are usually sprains, strains, scrapes, headaches, cramps, insect bites/stings and rashes. Examples of more serious illness or injury may include anaphylaxis, seizures, fractures, asthma attacks and concussions.

While some studies differ on what the top complaints are currently at camp, upper respiratory infections, skin complaints and musculoskeletal injuries remain common. [4] Upper respiratory infections have historically been the most common complaint at camp and Handler et al. [5] has documented this as the most common complaint for at least the last fifty years. With the exception of the year 2020, after a week at camp, the campers usually start to present with viral symptoms from being in close quarters with the other campers and sharing germs. These viruses will spread rapidly within the cabin and then to other cabins. Recognizing a viral syndrome early and attempting to mitigate the spread is an important part of the camp nurse's role in infection prevention and keeping the campers healthy and capable of participating in the fun camp activities.

A unique nursing task at camp is packing first aid kits for any out of camp trips. Camp nurses are responsible for packing any emergency medications, like epinephrine or inhalers, and each camper's required medications. It is the nurse's responsibility to ensure that everything is in the bag, which can be stressful, especially when the campers are leaving for an out of camp trip that may last longer than 3 days. Also, it is not uncommon for the nurse to prepare up to 10 trip bags in a day as multiple groups may be leaving for out of camp trips. In addition to packing first aid bags, a few other common daily tasks include cleaning, laundry, ensuring the supplies aren't low in stock or expired, picking up prescriptions from the local pharmacy, bringing campers to doctor appointments

and checking fridge temperatures.

4.3 Medication administration

According to an article published by Funk et al.^[6] medications most frequently administered in the camp setting are antihistamine and allergy medications, psychotropic medications, emergency/rescue medications followed by herbal supplements and vitamins. It is recommended that camp nurses who are unfamiliar with these medication classes research them prior to the camp session. The nurse should feel confident in the administration of epinephrine and anaphylaxis treatment. The most up to date guidelines for anaphylaxis treatment can be found on the ACH website as well as on the website UpToDate, and the nurse should also review the camp's policies on anaphylaxis.

Medication administration is different in the camp setting when compared to a hospital or clinical setting. There are many considerations when it comes to camp medication packaging, security, safety and administration. For example, there are no medication dispensaries, no pharmacies, no armbands or scanners. Each camp organizes medication preparation differently. Some camps use a medication packaging service specifically designated for camps. Other camps require parents to bring medications in original containers with prescriptions for all prescribed and over the counter medications. Local pharmacists may be utilized to repackage the medications from original packaging into labeled blister packs to allow for safe, efficient, individual dose dispensing.

All medications are kept secure by a locked room or cabinet. Medication passes are performed each day at breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime. This task is one of the easier tasks performed during the day and the process gets more efficient as the nurse learns all the campers and their medications. One other consideration is that there may be other personnel other than nurses that will administer the medications. Campers going on overnight trips will have their medications administered by the counselors. Nurses want to keep in mind that laws and regulations regarding medication administration may differ state to state. The American Camp Association website has resources to answer frequently asked questions related to medication management in the camp setting.

4.4 Delegation at camp

The camp nurse has the ability to delegate certain tasks to camp employees who are unlicensed or have a lower level of credentials. It is important that the nurse understands the camp policies related to delegation care. The Alliance for Camp Health^[7] has practice guidelines that address delegation in the camp setting. The practice guidelines follow the 2016 National Council of the State Boards of Nursing

guidelines for delegation which states the nurse, ". . . cannot delegate nursing judgment or any activity that will involve nursing judgment or critical decision making." Camp nurses need to be available for guidance during the time the delegation is completed. Examples of delegation may include medication administration, interventions such as placing ice packs, wound care, vital signs, and packing of first aid kits. The Alliance for Camp Health also states in their practice guidelines that effective communication and follow-up on the delegation is key.

5. CAMP SCHEDULE

Each day at camp will be different, but camps operate using a structured schedule. The general camp schedule includes when campers arise, eat, engage in activities, have down time, and go to bed. Obviously, the general camp schedule impacts the daily schedule and workflow of the camp nurse, and the camp nurse is often working around meal times and other camp activities. Although each day will be slightly different based on unexpected situations, which always arise, camp nurses may count on one thing being consistent – the

work day is long! Table 1 includes examples of the daily schedule for both campers and the nursing staff.

6. CAMPER MENTAL HEALTH

In addition to the daily tasks, the camp nurse has the ability to positively influence the lives and mental well-being of the young campers they serve. Campers not only get homesick, but they also need time and patience as they adjust to being without electronic devices and consistent online connection. According to Gaslin, [8] one of the biggest challenges facing the camp nurse is promoting mental, emotional and social health (MESH) in this young population. Articles published within the American Camp Association and the Alliance for Camp Health report a growing concern with mental health and well-being in the camp population due to the loss of socialization skills, difficulty with emotional regulation and an increase in mental illness diagnoses particularly after the 2020 pandemic.^[9] The camp nurse must be prepared to deal with these types of concerns that are almost always present at camp and seem to be growing.

Table 1. Example camper and camp nurse daily schedule

Time	Camper Schedule	Nursing Tasks
7:00-7:30 a.m.	Wake up	Prepare for morning medications, check fridge temperatures
8:00-9:00 a.m.	Breakfast	Breakfast medication administration and documentation
9:00-9:30 a.m.	Morning Assembly	After breakfast sick-call (campers that need to see the nurse)
9:35-10:15 a.m.	First Activity	Document on campers seen during sick call
10:20-11:00 a.m.	Second Activity	Pack first aid bags for afternoon trips
11:05-11:45 a.m.	Third Activity	Laundry
11:50-12:30 p.m.	Fourth Activity	Parent phone calls
12:30-12:45 p.m.	Unstructured Time	Lunch medication administration and documentation
12:45 p.m.	Lunch	Lunch
1:30p-2:30 p.m.	Rest Hour	Rest Hour for Nurses
2:30p-2:45 p.m.	Free Time	Afternoon sick-call
2:50p-3:30 p.m.	Fifth Activity	Documentation of campers seen during sick-call
3:35p-4:15 p.m.	Sixth Activity	Pack first-aid bags for trips planned for next morning
4:20p-5:00 p.m.	Seventh Activity	Pick up a prescriptions or supplies needed from town
5:05-5:45 p.m.	Choice Period	Parent phone-calls
6:00 p.m.	Dinner	Dinner medication administration and documentation
7:15-8:15 p.m.	Evening Program	Wipe down counters
		Clean used dishes
		Sweep floors and clean bathrooms
8:20 p.m.	Milk and Cookies	
8:30 p.m.	Night Bell	Bedtime medication administration and documentation
		Evening sick call
9:00-10:00 p.m.	Lights Out	Finish documentation and ensure morning trip first aid bags are ready

Courey^[2] found that camp nurses may feel ill equipped to handle the evaluation of psychological needs of the campers and staff they see. Most camp nurses do not come from mental health backgrounds; however, it is vital that they be able to recognize psychological decline and address it safely and appropriately. The first step is for the camp nurse to review camper health profiles which are completed by the camper's parent(s) prior to camp session. The camp profile will not only include medical concerns, but also concerns with mental or social health. Courey^[2] recommends that camp nurses utilize the Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing Standards of Care for Camp which include the nursing process of assessment, diagnosis, outcome identification, planning and implementation. Interventions highlighted in the article include: counseling, milieu therapy (identifying environmental, camp related factors that may be disruptive to mental health of the campers like lack of sleep), being knowledgeable about psychopharmacologic treatments such as stimulants for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), antidepressants, antianxiety medications, antipsychotics, antiepileptics and mood stabilizers. It's important for the camp nurse after discovery of a psychological deterioration of a camper or staff member to maintain safety first and then to coordinate services with the assistance of the camp administrative team and nurse supervisor to provide appropriate care for the camper or staff.

The ACA provides a comprehensive list of courses, webinars, podcasts, articles and other resources to assist both medical and non-medical staff with mental health care in the camp setting. Some of the topics addressed in this list include eating disorders, assessing for suicidal ideations, and self-injury. The camp nurse may ask about the policies related to these serious mental health concerns at the camp they will be working at. It is common for the camp administration and nurse supervisor to be utilized when a serious mental health concern becomes apparent.

7. SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

Due to the demands of working at camp, nurses must learn to decompress from the day-to-day stressors and be able to adequately care for themselves. Studies have found that work overload, combined with emotional exhaustion, can result in burnout syndrome. [10] Effective self-care starts by taking time for one's self; however, this relatively simple strategy is often challenging to achieve. There are numerous ways to incorporate self-care, but in this article, we will discuss two basic strategies that are particularly appropriate in the camp setting: daily physical activity and scheduled leisure/recreation.

It is important for nurses to have some sort of outlet to help

recharge their "internal" battery. Walking is a great physical activity that has been shown to boost energy and can help maintain mental clarity. Depending on where the camp is located, one may be able to capture panoramic views of lakes, rivers, mountains, or beautiful countryside. Taking a walk in the morning before getting fully vested in the day's activities can potentially help clear one's thoughts and have them feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the potential unknowns that the camp life brings.

With any other nursing job, the camp nurse may be entitled to certain days off. This much needed time away from camp can be utilized in a variety of different ways. Recreation and leisure activities will vary depending on the person and the location. It is not uncommon to be able to take a day trip and explore unique places in the area. This could be nature trails or waterfalls if one is seeking adventure. If certain staff members are off, a group activity can be a great way to connect with individuals and enjoy sharing memories together. The actions we partake in on a day-to-day basis have the ability to recharge our mind, re-energize our bodies and replenish a new-found appreciation of self-care, which is extremely important when working in the camp setting.

8. Unique opportunities

There are many other things a camp nurse manages because it is a role that is constantly evolving, which makes it an exciting field to consider for nurses. There are many benefits for nurses who choose to take advantage of this opportunity. Nurse educators may utilize this experience and turn it into an elective course (Camp Nursing) which incorporates a practicum experience at camp. It can be an innovative way to incorporate pediatric care experience which can be difficult for some schools to provide. In fact, according to Chesney et al., [12] members of the Institute of Pediatric Nursing's Education Taskforce, one major concern regarding the decrease in pediatric content and clinical experiences in nursing schools is an inexperienced pediatric nursing workforce. They recommend nurse educators consider new alternative pediatric experiences to ensure real-world ready pediatric nurses. Community-based pediatric settings are paramount to the success of preparing the new pediatric workforce. A camp nursing experience can be a great option for nursing students to bridge the gap between limited pediatric care opportunities and real hands-on pediatric care experience in a community setting.

Nursing students can be very helpful to the camp infirmary staff through appropriate delegation. Depending on the state, they may be able to take a medication administration course and help with medication administration. They can participate in assessment, treatment and documentation under the

supervision of the camp nurse. The difference in this experience when compared to the hospital clinical experience is that camp offers a unique setting and population, which can improve development of unique problem-solving skills and assessment skills including triage. Communication skills are also put to the test as all the camp staff become the campers family for the duration of the camp. This could be one week or up to the entire summer. This community setting will help nursing students understand the full pediatric patient in regard to health, development and growth.

Nurses who care for children with special needs may also benefit from a change in the environment at special needs camps. Camps for special needs children and adolescents may include burn camp, diabetes camp or camps for children with cancer or chronic diseases. The literature identifies nurses who care for special needs children in acute care settings may experience compassion fatigue, moral distress and grief.^[13] These camps can provide nurses with a new perspective on the patients they care for and improve morale. A study by Butterworth et al.^[13] collected experiences from PICU nurses who worked at a camp for pediatric cancer patients. The study found the nurses' experiences working with children and adolescents in this setting renewed their passion for their work. Witnessing children, adolescents and their families in a different environment participating in normal activities rather than being a patient in the hospital, allowed them to see the joy still present in their life rather than the suffering they commonly see when caring for them in the acute care setting. In addition, the participants felt they could be more open with their feelings rather than having to control their emotions. The positive effects of their experiences at camp caused many to consider returning again and may improve overall morale on their units as they return to work in the acute care setting.

9. THROUGH OUR EYES: EMILY & BLAKE

Two of the authors, Emily and Blake, have worked for several summers as a camp nurse. Between the two of them, they have almost 10 years of camp nurse experience. Emily and Blake both explained they have learned a lot about being a camp nurse during this time, and have many great memories of serving in this unique role. Both Emily and Blake have provided some personal reflections about camp nursing.

9.1 Emily

I have had the opportunity to work as a camp nurse at a traditional all girls camp in the Carolinas for several years. Being a camper myself in my teen years at a camp in the same area, I knew sending my own children to camp was going to be important to me. I remember the impact the camp experience

had on my life. It instilled courage, confidence, a sense of responsibility to the community, a connection to nature and so much more. Being a camp nurse and participating in a tuition swap over pay allows me the benefit of watching my own children learn the value of the camp experience. In addition, I get to build relationships with the other campers and staff I see year after year and also celebrate their successes.

As a nurse educator with a background in emergency nursing, I feel working in the camp environment has improved my assessment skills, clinical judgment, medication knowledge and resourcefulness. The camp nursing role has given me a better understanding of pediatric growth and development, and a greater appreciation for social and community health. Overall, I believe my camp nurse experiences have helped make me a better nurse educator.

9.2 Blake

For the past three summers, I have had the pleasure of working as the nurse at a traditional all boys camp in New England. My interest in this role grew out of my experience working as a young men's tennis coach, as well as serving as a church youth leader. Camp nursing seemed like a great way to combine my knowledge and skills as a pediatric nurse, with my passion for coaching and mentoring youth. However, I can still remember the butterflies I felt when driving up to the camp for the very first time. Thankfully, from the moment I arrived, it felt like "home," and that is one of the driving forces that has kept me returning each summer.

At the particular camp where I work, there is a combination of both water and land activities, including hiking trips, white water rafting, inter-camp athletics, and many more. I especially enjoy seeing the campers put away their electronic devices, try new activities, have fun, develop friendships with other campers, and develop positive character traits that they will carry with them throughout their lives. Seeing the growth of the campers over the course of the summer, and from year to year, is one of my favorite things to witness as the camp nurse.

10. CONCLUSION

The camp nursing role is tough, but it is such a special experience. While the fear of jumping into a new environment can be stressful, the gratification experienced in the role as a camp nurse is second to none. Only at camp can one observe the joy, laughter, power, success and love that is experienced there. The camp nurse gets to see the campers grow and change each year and cheer them on. They get to meet campers and counselors from all over the world. This role may allow one to bring out their younger, silly self by participating in camp activities or infirmary games. It is

important to get engaged at camp, and there are a variety of activities that the nurse can get involved in. If the camp nurse is specialized in certain skills, they can share that passion with others. This could be anything from arts/crafts, woodworking, to even tennis or soccer. Although wearing the nurse "hat" at all times, camp still allows the ability for nurses to interact with the campers and staff members at a personal level.

If a camp nurse is lucky enough to see their own children or grandchildren participate, they will see them firsthand build confidence in themselves and contribute to the camp community which can bring overwhelming joy and pride. The benefits all the campers and staff will experience by being a part of this camp community will shape them and live with them forever. Being a part of that experience is very rewarding. After all, there is no experience like the camp experience.

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