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# School nurse's role sees increasing change

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**Duties range from administering medication to managing chronic conditions**

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By [STEPHANIE KISZCZAK](#)  
The Telegraph

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This is the first of two parts on the dramatically evolving role of school nurses, an occupation affected by education, budgets, legislation and changes in society.*

They treat bee stings, skinned knees, stomachaches, bumps and bruises and deal with physical and mental disabilities of all kinds.

School nurses do more than just stick on a Band-Aid. They serve as someone kids turn to when things get rough.

"It's almost like being in an ER; you never know what's going to come in," Gloria Reynolds said.

Reynolds, a nurse at East Elementary School, a kindergarten through fifth-grade school of 540 students in Alton, compares a school nurse's office to an emergency room.

Reynolds, a hospital nurse for 15 years and a school nurse for 11 years, said today's school nurse has extra responsibilities - which means more to juggle.

"We do more than just first aid," she said.

School nurses work with diabetic children to keep their blood sugar intact throughout the day. They care for children with mental and physical disabilities and also those who rely on catheters and tracheal suctioning to survive.

An American Federation of Teachers article on school nurses further illustrates the added responsibilities of modern school nurses.

"School nurses don't just dole out bandages anymore," the article said. "They administer medication and monitor medication response, respiratory status, seizure patterns and blood glucose levels. School nurses monitor students for parasites, skin infections, infectious diseases and sexual and physical abuse."

Some school nurses also perform routine hearing and vision tests.



The Telegraph/JOHN BADMAN  
Crystal Clark, school nurse at Eastwood Elementary School in East Alton, performs a hearing test on kindergarten student Olivia Scifres, 6. A school nurse's responsibilities have changed greatly in recent years.

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Crystal Clark, a nurse at Eastwood Elementary School, a K-5 school of approximately 500 students in East Alton, said administering medication isn't always a quick or easy task.

"Medications are not just handing out a pill," she said. "Sometimes it involves assessment."

For example, if a student tells Clark he or she is having difficulty breathing, Clark assesses the child's condition. She pays close attention to the child's coloring, monitors their pulse and muscle use, and listens to "all six lung fields" before taking action.

"We reassess them; you don't just give them their inhaler and send them back to class," Clark said. "It's just all safety; you're looking out for that child to keep them here at school. You want the kids here, you want them healthy, you want them well."

School nurses also work closely with school social workers to find out what's going on at the child's home - and what they can do to help. Some families are without water or electrical services and children go for days without a shower, Clark said. In such a case, Clark has the student clean up in the bathroom in her office and gives them a clean change of clothes.

"We try to help the family the best we can," Clark said. "For a lot of them, we are their first line of health care."

School nurses also attend student Individual Education Plan meetings. In such meetings, a child's health is discussed so educators can determine if health issues are affecting the child's schoolwork.

In addition to reaching out to children and their families, school nurses aim to educate -both in the classroom and out. Nurses continually distribute information to parents and guardians about their child's health concern.

Robin Halemeyer is a school nurse for East Alton Middle School and the Washington Early Childhood Center. She is responsible for the care of approximately 460 children. Parents and guardians turn to Halemeyer for information and guidance regarding their child's health.

"A lot of questions; 'What should I do?' or 'What do you think of this?'" she said.

When children enter middle school and begin the transition into the teenage years, Halemeyer doesn't have as much contact with parents/guardians. Instead, she develops a solid relationship with the future teenagers.

"Many of their needs are social," Halemeyer said. "I hear a lot of stories."

Middle school-aged children, often referred to as "tweens," approach Halemeyer for guidance and support - whether it's about family, friends, school or puberty.

"Most of them are very open," she said.

School nurses are also active inside the classroom, teaching younger children the importance of hand washing and older children about the changes they will see as their bodies develop. The growth and development topic is introduced during a child's fifth-grade year.

Jasmine Brown, 11, a sixth-grader at Trimpe Middle School in Bethalto, appreciates a school nurse who can do more than simply treat wounds.

Brown was diagnosed with diabetes in January 2007. In November 2007, her pancreas "shut down," which caused her to get sick often and miss approximately 22 days of school.

"My daughter's had a rough, rough year with diabetes," said her mother, Rachel Roose.

But thanks to school nurse Sherri Verdun, the transition has been easier.

"She counts the carbs I use and she tells me how much insulin to take," said Brown, who goes to Verdun's office several times a day to test her blood sugar. "She always helps me with my food, what to eat and what not to eat."

Verdun, a nurse at Trimpe Middle and Bethalto East Elementary Schools in Bethalto, is responsible for the care of approximately 1,100 children between the two schools.

To show their appreciation for all Verdun does, Brown and Roose, nominated her for a Family Resource Network Partners in Care Award from the American Diabetes Association of the St. Louis area.

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