High-intensity disasters leave communities in tatters, lives lost, and property damaged. The United Nations (2015) reports 90% of disasters are weather related, and the United States experiences the highest number of weather-related disasters compared to all other nations. In addition to storm-related disasters, wildfires are occurring more frequently and with more intensity (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2018).

Climate change is increasing, and the warming of our atmosphere is intensifying (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2019). True to scientific predictions, we have seen more intense and frequent storms and wildfires in the past decade. Humans have not yet curtailed emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, the primary driver of global warming. This means that until we are successful at limiting greenhouse gases, and removing excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, climate change will continue to intensify, and storms and wildfires are almost guaranteed to worsen. As if this weren’t enough, human-made disasters like mass shootings, train derailments, and airplane crashes continue to result in inestimable loss and suffering.

Roles and Preparation of Nurses in Disaster Response

Nurses have always responded to people in need, including during and after disasters. After all, we are called by Nursing’s Social Policy Statement to provide our services to society, even in hazardous conditions (American Nurses Association, 2010). Yet, it is challenging to keep a profession prepared and available for disasters that are increasing in frequency and intensity.

In the event of a natural or man-made disaster, nurses, with their adept abilities to organize, prioritize, and collaborate, are key components to a robust disaster response. They respond to scenes of disaster, to their healthcare organizations, and to community support areas to provide compassionate, expert care. Nurses assist in management of supplies and human resources. They continually triage patients and direct them to appropriate care areas for treatment. Nurses are typically the primary caregivers for patients. During disasters, nurses not only deliver high-quality clinical skills, but they care for individuals and families who have lost loved ones, homes, or pets. They hold dear the responsibility to care for the whole patient, body and soul, in the face of these tragic losses.

Today’s disasters are already overwhelming. If we anticipate experiencing more frequent and more intense storms, floods, and wildfires, how should nurses prepare? How do we ensure that we are able to serve our professional duty to provide nursing care for patients, families, and communities? To be best prepared for the event of a disaster, nurses must drill in an environment that is as realistic as possible. If a nurse can train within an actual setting designed for disaster and emergency management, such as the FEMA Center for Domestic Preparedness in Aniston, AL, they should jump at the chance. The center helps to develop knowledge within an intense, life-like environment. Preparation and education help to create the muscle and mental memory necessary to respond efficiently and effectively.

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Self-care is an important element. Nurses, faced with real disasters, have described intense levels of anxiety for prolonged periods of time, while they work to stay calm and focus on care delivery. They face intense conditions, clinical challenges, and the weight of suffering they see around them. They may not recognize or prepare for the impact disasters can have on their personal lives. In fact, high levels of preparation may not be effective if the nurse does not have the resilience to recover from these duties. Nursing leaders can contribute by developing relief and support systems for all caregivers, so they may create a healthy work/life balance, which is critical to recovery from a disaster; this is especially needed as we face an increase in expected disasters.

Mitigating Climate Change

Nurses are critical team members in disaster response and can be relied upon for their tireless service. However, because of the degree of human suffering, we must consider if we are doing all we can to prevent harm. If ongoing emissions of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will worsen storms, floods, and fires, then by decreasing greenhouse gases we can begin to curb these growing climate-related disasters.

This too is a nursing consideration. Nurses need to understand how the use of energy, equipment, and supplies in the delivery of nursing care impacts our climate conditions. Nurses can lead activities and initiatives to change nursing practice and help mitigate the effects. They can take into consideration how they travel to work, and how they manage waste. They can help establish local and sustainable food choices in the workplace and at home. They can ask the organizations where they practice to be good stewards of our climate through conservation and use of renewable energy sources. By addressing this aspect of nursing practice, nurses can contribute to mitigation of climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In so doing, nurses will be doing their part to ramp down the growing intensity and frequency of natural disasters, saving lives and property, and keeping communities intact.

Several practical resources are available. Nurses can participate in the Nurses Climate Challenge (Health Care Without Harm, 2019). This set of tools gives nurses the resources they need to educate other health professionals about climate and health. The initiative has a goal of educating 50,000 professionals by 2020. Nurses can contribute to a better understanding of nurses’ awareness and behaviors related to climate change and health by completing the CHANT: Climate, Health, and Nursing Tool (Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, 2019).

In this issue of Nursing Economic$, authors describe nurses’ response and preparation for disasters such as wildfires, floods, and storms. Their insights and knowledge provide paths forward to ensure that nurses continue to be key partners in helping individuals and communities develop resilience, and to recover from these challenging disasters. $

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