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Story URL: <http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news.aspx?id=200373>

Story Retrieval Date: 4/6/2015 4:52:11 PM CST

Fake sick? Fake Illnesses are nothing new to school nurses

by **ERIN SHEA**
Feb 15, 2012

If the stereotype of the school nurse was ever accurate, it's not now. They take care of headaches, stomachaches and occasional students who fake to stay out of class. But there's also helping with daily medication, obesity and nutrition planning, mental-health issues, disease outbreaks and making arrangements for special-needs children.

Cameron Traut is a nurse at Libertyville High School and former president of Illinois Association of School Nurses. Before starting her career in school nursing, Traut thought that the life of a school nurse would be boring, but she soon realized it was more than what the stereotypes taught her. She spoke with Medill Reports about her complex job.

What's the one thing that people don't realize about being a school nurse?

There's a feeling out there that we deal with headaches and stomachaches and kids that don't want to be in class. That's the number one question I get, "How can you tell who's faking it and who's not?"

In the school setting we are the medical professionals. If there is an emergency, choking, a seizure, or cardiac event, you are the one that people are going to turn to and do what needs to be done.

I think there is a lot more pressure in the sense of you always have to be aware and ready to respond because you are the medical professional in the building.

What's the most common issue that you see?

I think it is just the general headache and stomachache, but that can turn into mental-health issues, like a little anxiety, or bipolar disease, ADHD, or panic attacks and depression. We're seeing an increase in the mental-health issues. Typically behind that headache or stomachache there is something else going on with that student.

What about the issues with children not being vaccinated? How does this affect the community?

I respectfully disagree with parents who do not vaccinate their children. I've seen evidence of vaccines working, we've all seen evidence of vaccines working and it's pretty obvious that they work and serve an important purpose. The kids that aren't vaccinated are protected by those around them who are vaccinated. Around our district they are protected because of the number of students vaccinated. I would say under 1% of my students are not vaccinated.

What about a disease outbreak, such as a flu outbreak?

Most of our students, because they have access to health care, are getting the flu shot annually, so they are pretty well protected. It's the basics of reminding them to not share water bottles and to wash your hands all the time. I review the basics of disease transmission with my students and staff. If there was ever an outbreak, the school nurse is right there to monitor that.

With the recent push for children to eat healthier and be more active, what have you seen in your district?

We have health class and P.E. classes, which are mandated by the state, so that's factored in. We are in a unique situation because we do not have a lot of children in the district on federally funded food programs, so a challenge for me is to try to work with the food director to try to make the meals healthier. The culture in my school is in a way that it is hard to change how students view the use of food for fundraisers and parties.

Have you seen the menu change at all?

A little bit. They are making gradual changes in the kinds of drinks they are offering. There is a little more variety in the lunch line. I would like to keep changing that, I think we can do more and more but it's a slow and gradual process.

What are the biggest concerns with children's health now?

Access to care is always a big issue. Access to an actual physician is the challenge, even once they have aid, some doctors don't want to take these kids because of the reimbursement issues. Obesity is still an issue, and access to good mental health facilities is an issue.



Courtesy of Libertyville High School

Cameron Trout is ready to go in case of an emergency. As the school nurse at Libertyville High School for the past eight years, she regularly handles medications and nutrition issues and assists special needs children.