

Health educators

Working for wellness

by Colleen Teixeira

As the saying goes, “If you’ve got your health, you’ve got everything.” Health educators have made this instructional adage a professional mantra.

Health educators promote wellness and healthy lifestyles. Covering a wide range of topics, these workers teach individuals and communities about behaviors that encourage healthy living and prevent diseases and other problems. The subjects they cover, and the methods they use, depend on where they work and whom they instruct.

This article describes the work of health educators. It explains what they do, including how population and place affect their job tasks. It also provides information about their employment, earnings, job prospects, and training requirements. Suggestions for locating additional resources are at the end of the article.

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Promoting healthy lifestyles

The specific duties of health educators vary by work setting. But whether they work in a hospital, school, business, or other setting, all health educators use similar skills and tools. In general, health educators begin by assessing their audience and planning a program that suits its needs. Then, they implement the program and evaluate its success.

Assessment. Health educators must determine which topics and information are most pertinent to each group. For women at risk for breast cancer, for example, a health educator might consider a program on self-exams; for college students, he or she might decide to teach a class on the hazards of binge drinking.

In determining the needs of the audience, health educators must also assess appropriate methods for presenting the material. For example, a program targeting the elderly would involve different pacing and cultural

references than one aimed at high schoolers.

Planning. After assessing audience needs, health educators must decide how to meet those needs. They have a lot of options. They can organize a lecture, demonstration, or health screening or create a video, brochure, or display. Often, health educators create a program that combines several of these elements.

Planning usually requires collaboration with other professionals. To prepare a program on childhood obesity, for example, a health educator might need to consult with pediatricians, exercise physiologists, and nutritionists.

Implementation. Implementing a plan may first require that health educators secure funding by seeking out and applying for grants, writing a curriculum for a class, or creating written materials for distributing to the public. It might also require that they complete some



Health educators often collaborate with other professionals to plan a program.

administrative tasks, such as finding a speaker to present the topic or a venue for the event to be held.

During the program, health educators' roles vary. They might present the topic themselves or serve primarily on the sidelines, introducing the speaker or encouraging audience participation. The next section, "People and places," describes in more detail how health educators' instructional tasks differ, based on where they work and the populations they serve.

Evaluation. Usually, after a program is presented, health educators evaluate its success. They focus on evidence-based methods of evaluation, such as tracking the absentee rate of employees or students or creating and using participant surveys. Through evaluation, they can improve the plans for future programs by avoiding problems, learning from mistakes, and capitalizing on strengths.

People and places

Health educators generally work in healthcare facilities, schools, private businesses, public health departments, and nonprofit organizations. Where they work determines their job duties and the types of people they serve.

Healthcare. In hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare settings, health educators often work one-on-one with patients and their families. These health educators might fully explain a patient's diagnosis and any tests, surgeries, or other procedures that may be required. They might also teach the patient about lifestyle changes that are necessary to manage the disease or to assist with recovery. They might, for example, show a patient with diabetes how to test blood sugar and take insulin. At times, these health educators locate services, such as in-home healthcare or support groups, that will assist the patient in managing an illness.

In addition to working with patients, health educa-



Some health educators present programs on wellness issues, such as the importance of nutrition and exercise.

By choosing age-appropriate materials, health educators can work with a variety of audiences.

tors in healthcare facilities might develop educational programs for the community. Topics could include instruction in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), first aid, proper nutrition, or self-examination for disease. Planning these programs often requires collaboration with doctors, nurses, and other staff.

Health educators might also develop educational materials for other departments within a healthcare facility. This may require participating on a committee to develop resources for patient education, such as brochures, Web sites, or classes, or working with individual departments to ensure that health education materials exist for each medical specialty. In some cases, health educators might also be asked to provide training in patient interaction to other hospital staff.

Schools. School-based health educators work primarily with students. In colleges and universities, they generally cover topics that affect young adults, such as smoking, nutrition, and sexual activity. Health educators might need to alter their teaching methods to attract audiences to their events. For example, they might show popular movies and then discuss the health issues addressed, or they might hold workshops in a dorm or cafeteria. Health educators may also recruit and train students to serve as peer educators and advise the students in planning events. Some college-based health educators also teach health courses for academic credit or run workshops, give lectures, or provide demonstrations for new-student orientation programs.

Compared with health educators in other settings, those working in junior high and high schools typically spend more time in a classroom than in an office. This is because health educators at this level often teach health class. They develop lesson plans for teaching topics that are relevant and age appropriate for their students. At times, they may need to cover sensitive subjects, such as prevention of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Private business. Health educators based in private businesses create programs for educating a firm's employees as a whole, organizing programs that fit the workers' schedules. Schedule-sensitive programs might include arranging lunchtime speakers or daylong health screenings so workers may come when it is convenient



for them.

Health educators in corporate settings must align their work with the overall goals of their employer. For example, a health educator working for a medical supply company may hold programs relating to the company's newest products on the market.

Public health. Health educators in public health are employed primarily by State and local departments of public health and are, therefore, often responsible for administering State-mandated programs. As part of this work, they inform other professionals about changes to health policy.

Health educators in public health work closely with nonprofit organizations to help them get the resources they need, such as grants, to continue serving the community. Also, these health educators often sit on state-wide councils or national committees, including those that study issues related to aging.

Nonprofit organizations. Many health educators work in nonprofit organizations that educate about a particular disease or target a specific population. Therefore, health educators in this setting are usually limited in the topics they cover or the people they serve.

Work in a nonprofit organization might include creating print-based material for distributing throughout the community, often in conjunction with organizing lectures, health screenings, and activities related to increasing awareness. Health educators work with other nonprofit organizations or with individuals within the communities they are trying to serve.

Employment and earnings

Full-time health educators generally work a standard 9-to-5 day, 40-hour per week schedule. As programs, events, or meetings require, however, they may need to work in the evenings or on weekends.

Health educators held 57,900 jobs in May 2006, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). They worked primarily in general medical and surgical hospitals, individual and family services, and local and State governments. In addition, a small number of them worked in outpatient care centers.

Median annual wages of health educators were \$41,330 in May 2006, according to BLS. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$72,500, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$24,750.

Job outlook

BLS projects employment of health educators to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2014. Job growth is driven by the rising costs of healthcare, increased awareness of preventable diseases, the need for early detection of diseases, and an increasing recognition of the need for qualified health educators. People seeking work in this field should have favorable job prospects.

Insurance companies, employers, and governments are looking for ways to curb continued spikes in healthcare costs. Because teaching people about healthy living is less expensive than treating sick patients, health educators' skills in preventing costly illnesses are in demand. Many serious illnesses—such as lung cancer, heart disease, and skin cancer—are linked to unhealthy but largely avoidable behaviors. As a result, BLS projects that State and local governments, hospitals, and businesses will hire health educators to teach the public about lifestyle choices.

Not all diseases are avoidable, of course. Many times, however, detecting an illness early increases the chances for successful treatment. Health educators teach people how to perform self-exams for some diseases that are more easily treated if detected early, such as testicular cancer. Therefore, health educators are increasingly sought to make the public aware of the advantages of early detection.

In the past, health education duties were often assigned to nurses or other healthcare professionals. In recent years, however, employers have recognized that health educators are better trained to perform those du-

ties. As a result, demand has increased for workers who have a background specifically in health education.

All of these factors have led to job growth for health educators in most industries, but jobs may decrease in secondary schools through 2014. Cash-strapped schools frequently cut back on health education programs and ask teachers trained in other subjects, such as science or physical education, to teach health education.

Overall job prospects for health educators are expected to be favorable, however. Applicants who gain relevant experience through internships or volunteer jobs will have the best opportunities. Health educators who have at least a master's degree, which is generally required only when working in public health, may have the best prospects. Although this occupation is growing strongly, it still employs relatively few people.

Becoming a health educator

Preparing for a career in health education requires creative and interpersonal skills, academic preparation, and, for some positions, professional credentials. Advancement in the occupation may require all of the above.

Skills. Health educators are often required to create new programs or materials and, therefore, should be creative and adept writers. They spend much of their time working with people, so they must be both good listeners and good speakers. In particular, they should be comfortable speaking publicly because they may teach classes or give presentations.

Health educators also must be able to work with both individuals and large groups, including committees. Because health educators often work with diverse populations, they must be culturally sensitive and open to working with people of varied backgrounds.

Education. A bachelor's degree is generally the minimum requirement for an entry-level health educator position. However, some employers may prefer to hire people who have a bachelor's degree plus related experience from an internship or volunteer work. A master's degree in health education or a related field is usually required for higher level positions or to work in public health. More than 250 colleges and universities offer undergraduate and graduate programs in health education or a similarly titled area of study.

Courses in health education generally cover the theories of health education and help students develop the

skills necessary to plan, implement, and evaluate health education programs. Health education students should also consider courses in psychology, human development, and a foreign language to make themselves more marketable. Many schools also offer information and assistance to students who are interested in an internship or volunteer opportunities.

At the graduate-degree level, students may pursue a master of arts, science, education, or public health. Relevant fields of study include community health education, school health education, and health promotion. Many students who have studied or worked in a related field, such as nursing or psychology, later earn their master's degree in health education.

Credentials. Some States require health educators who work in public health to be certified health education specialists, and many employers outside of public health also prefer to hire those who are certified.

The Certified Health Education Specialists designation is offered by the National Commission of Health Education Credentialing. Certification is awarded to those who pass a test covering the basics of health edu-

cation. The exam is designed for entry-level educators who have earned a degree in health education or who are within 3 months of graduating.

To maintain certification, health educators must complete 75 hours of continuing education every 5 years.

Advancement. Higher level health education positions, which usually require an advanced degree, include executive director, supervisor, and senior health educator. People working in these positions may spend more time on planning and evaluating programs than on their implementation.

Higher level positions may also require supervising other health educators who implement the programs. Health educators at this level may also work with other administrators within an organization.

Some health educators pursue a doctoral degree in health education, which allows them to conduct research or to become professors of health education.

For more information

Many health educators say their jobs are rewarding. They appreciate the variation in their day-to-day activi-



ties: One day might be spent teaching a class on the risks of doing drugs, followed the next day by meetings with community organizers of events for American Heart Month. Health educators often enjoy working on different projects with diverse groups of people.

If this occupation interests you, learn more about it by continuing your research. Begin by visiting a career counselor or your local library, where you'll find information about the industries in which health educators work.

Among the resources in many career counselor offices and libraries are the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and *Career Guide to Industries*, which provide details about the working conditions, employment, earnings and more for hundreds of occupations and dozens of industries. You can also find these publications online: the *Handbook* at www.bls.gov/oco and the *Career Guide* at www.bls.gov/oco/cg.

Associations are also a good source of career information. For general information about health educators, contact:

American Association for Health Education
1900 Association Dr.
Reston, VA 20191

Toll-free: 1 (800) 213-7193
(703) 476-3400

www.aahperd.org/aahe

Society for Public Health Education

750 First St. NE., Suite 910

Washington, DC 20002

(202) 408-9804

www.sophe.org

For information about voluntary credentialing and job opportunities, contact:

National Commission for Health Education
Credentialing, Inc.

1541 Alta Dr., Suite 303

Whitehall, PA 18052

Toll-Free: 1 (888) 624-3248

(484) 223-0770

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