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A study of the opinions of public health staff nurses regarding public health nursing supervision

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Boston University
A STUDY OF THE OPINIONS OF PUBLIC HEALTH STAFF NURSES REGARDING PUBLIC HEALTH NURSING SUPERVISION

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nursing and public health authorities point out that good supervision is essential to public health nursing.\(^1\)\(^2\) In a field in which so many various and complex demands are made on the worker as there are in public health nursing, supervision is necessary to insure the best results. During the years in which public health nursing established itself as an integral part of community health programs, it was extensively recognized that supervision was essential. Now, public health nursing supervision is generally accepted as a vital feature in the organization of public health programs.

Public health nurses work as members of a health team to further community health. In all phases of their work, emphasis is placed on the prevention of disease, the promotion of health, and rehabilitative measures. Functions of public health nurses reflect the trends arising from

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changing community needs; therefore, pre-service education must prepare the public health nurse to meet these needs. Even though greater pre-service training is necessary, a 1957 survey of the public health nursing education of staff nurses employed in public health indicated that from a total of twenty-five thousand nurses reporting, 65.1 per cent had less than one year, or no further preparation beyond the diploma program. Whatever the public health staff nurse's educational background may be, constant guidance will be necessary for her to function effectively in the performance of her duties. The supervisor, in order to be successful in carrying out her supervisory program, must know what expectations staff nurses have of supervisors.

Statement of the Problem

What are the opinions of public health staff nurses regarding public health nursing supervision?

Justification of the Problem

In the writer's experience as a public health staff nurse, she had never been employed in an agency providing

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public health nursing supervision. The writer, however, had opinions about supervision in public health nursing. The views of those to be supervised cannot be ignored by those who are going to supervise. Therefore, learning the views of the public health staff nurses regarding public health nursing supervision may be of value to public health nursing supervisors in planning supervisory programs.

Scope and Limitations

The limitations of this study were:

The sample consisted of fifteen public health staff nurses from three different visiting nurse associations in three cities in one state in New England.

The findings are applicable only to the fifteen nurses and no generalizations can be made to any other groups of public health nurses.

Definition of Terms

Public health nurse. Refers to a graduate registered nurse, with or without public health nursing preparation, employed by a visiting nurse association.

Preview of Methodology

Fifteen public health staff nurses from three
visiting nurse associations were interviewed by the writer. The average length of each interview was thirty minutes.

**Sequence of Presentation**

Chapter II consists of the theoretical framework upon which the study is based.

Chapter III describes more completely the methods used to secure the data for the study.

Chapter IV contains the presentation and discussion of the findings.

Chapter V presents the summary, conclusions and recommendations resulting from the study.
CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature revealed one study related to opinions of public health nurses regarding supervision; but there were several articles that discussed the main purpose of supervision and the functions of the supervisor in nursing, in social work, and in business. The articles indicated that there was a similarity in the purpose of supervision and the basic functions of the supervisor.

Paynich, in a study of the student's concept of supervision in public health nursing, analyzed the supervisory guidance received by forty-five nursing students from two diploma and two collegiate schools during an eight weeks public health nursing experience in the one public health agency. The data were collected by using an interview schedule of free response questions. The findings revealed that: eighty-seven per cent of the students thought their supervisory guidance was adequate; nine per cent did

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Mary L. Paynich, "The Student's Concept of Supervision in Public Health Nursing," Nursing Outlook, October 1955, pp. 544-547.
not think so; and four per cent believed it partly so. The students of the collegiate schools accepted supervision more readily than those of the diploma schools; however, students of the diploma schools utilized the services of the supervisor to a greater extent. From the picture drawn by the study participants, it was concluded that the nursing student was aware of what constituted good supervision.

Sister Mary Barbara Ann,\(^\text{2}\) investigated what general duty nurses thought of the hospitals in which they worked. She received some comments on nursing supervision. Many staff nurses did not seem to look favorably at supervision, and they criticized the kind of supervision they were exposed to. They mentioned that lack of supervision, lack of cooperation and poor interpersonal relationships among nursing personnel at all levels, and the supervisors' repeated attendance at professional meetings without providing opportunities for staff nurses to attend, were sources of dissatisfaction in the hospitals employing them.

Berberet,\(^\text{3}\) a public health staff nurse, described


the supervision she received as a continuous process carried out in all phases of her work. Constant guidance was available to her no matter what activity was being planned. She further stated that with good supervision the work became educational to both the nurse and the patient.

Mondik, a public health staff nurse, in describing what supervision meant to her stated that if she had not had the support and guidance she received from her first public health nursing supervisor, the chances were that discouragement would have driven her out of public health nursing into some other type of nursing.

Freeman, in a discussion about supervision, stated that the main purpose of supervision in public health nursing was improvement of nursing service. All other objectives, such as, a smooth running office, a dependable system of recording, job satisfaction and personal security must be secondary to this. Because of changes in public health and public health nursing, the modern public health nurse must be proficient; she must be skilled in inter-

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personal relationships; and she must be able to think and to act with sound judgement. The supervisor must have the ability to develop such qualities in each staff member in order that the individual will have an opportunity to grow, and thereby provide better service to the entire community.

Donovan, 6 in describing supervision stated that supervision is an activity concerned with checking on progress and of carrying forward the aims of the organization at any administrative level. She also stated that the supervisor, with the other levels of administration personnel, is involved in achieving all the goals of nursing service.

Carroll and others, 7 studied the functions and activities of the supervisor in public health nursing agencies and found a great similarity between the literature and her data. The activities of the supervisor were classed as follows: activities including staff assignments carried out for the direct or indirect benefit of the patient or


the family, in-service education activities, and maintenance of relationships. The activities of the supervisor overlapped many fields including administration, and teaching, but the supervisory activities were directed toward the ultimate improvement of nursing service. The findings of this study further revealed that most of the supervisor's time was spent in activities on the supervisory level. The major portion of the time was spent in areas of staff and self development.

Abbott, in her discussion of supervisory activities listed teaching, counseling and consultation as the activities that now head the list of the public health nursing supervisor's activities. She stated that an important function of the public health nursing supervisor was to help the staff nurses develop the skill needed to give optimum service to the families with whom they work.

Throughout, the literature revealed that there existed agreement regarding the main purpose of supervision, the necessity of supervision and the functions of the supervisor. Whatever could be found concerning the opinions of nurses regarding supervision in hospitals and

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public health agencies indicated that staff nurses had different reactions to supervision. However, nowhere in the literature was it clearly stated that staff nurses, either in hospitals or in public health agencies, were aware of the purposes of supervision.

**Statement of Hypothesis**

Public health staff nurses have limited ideas regarding the purposes of public health nursing supervision.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Selection and Description of the Sample

The sample included all the public health staff nurses, fifteen in number, employed by three visiting nurse associations in three cities in one state in New England.

The program of each of the agencies included: nursing care of acute and chronic illness, instruction in the care of the patient, rehabilitation of the handicapped, giving treatments and medications, and instruction in maternal and infant health. All the agencies were located in industrial communities. One agency served a community with a population of eighty-seven thousand, and employed seven staff nurses, one supervisor and one director. This agency also had a field instruction program for collegiate nursing students. The other agencies each served a population of approximately eighteen thousand. One employed five staff nurses, one supervisor and one director. The other employed three staff nurses and one supervisor, who was also acting director and also carried a small case load.
The ages of the staff nurses participating in the study were as follows: five were under twenty-five years of age; seven were in the thirty-six to fifty year age group; and three were in the fifty-one to sixty-five year age group. Five respondents had been doing public health nursing less than two years, four from two to seven years, five from eight to fifteen years, and one for eighteen years. All respondents except one had always worked in a public health agency which provided supervision. Twelve of the respondents were graduates of diploma schools; the other three were graduates of basic collegiate schools. Three of the diploma school graduates had received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1959, making a total of six out of fifteen staff nurses, who had baccalaureate degrees. Four other respondents were currently taking courses; and five had no further education other than the three years in a diploma school of nursing. All except one of the staff nurses were members of one or more professional organizations.

Procurement of Data

The director of each agency was contacted by telephone for an appointment to discuss the study and to obtain permission to collect the data. The directors in two
agencies requested a preliminary interview with the writer; the director in the third agency granted permission for doing the study over the telephone. During the preliminary interview with the directors in the other two agencies, approval for doing the study was given. Appointments for interviewing each staff nurse were arranged by the directors in the three agencies. No previous contact was made by the writer with the staff nurses until the time designated for the interview.

The writer made six visits over a period of four weeks to collect the data. One to five interviews were conducted during each visit.

The investigator used the following procedure at the time of the interview with each staff nurse.

1. Introduced herself as a student at Boston University, School of Nursing.
2. Discussed the purpose of the study.
3. Assured the nurses that names of agencies, cities and nurses would not be identified.
4. Assured the nurse that her responses would remain confidential.
5. Informed the nurse that the interview would take approximately thirty minutes.
6. Gave the nurse an opportunity to ask questions.

All respondents showed an interest in the study and the writer felt that they expressed opinions freely.
Tool Used to Collect Data

An interview schedule\(^1\) was developed for use in the collection of the data. The American Nurses' Association\(^2\) statement of functions, standards and qualifications for public health nurses and the writer's knowledge were used as resources in developing the interview schedule.

One part of the interview schedule pertained to the functions of the supervisor as related to the growth and development of public health staff nurses; another part requested a listing of areas in which some or more supervision would be welcome. The last section of the interview schedule pertained to the personal and professional background of the respondent.

The interview schedule was tried out with one public health staff nurse employed by the health department in one of the cities and two public health nursing students at Boston University, School of Nursing. No changes were found to be necessary.

\(^1\)See Appendix

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Presentation and Discussion of Data

Respondents were asked what they thought was the main purpose of supervision, and what they thought were other purposes of supervision in public health nursing. Table I presents these views.

The responses indicated that the purposes of supervision in public health nursing were understood by public health staff nurses. Eight nurses gave program planning and overseeing the work as the main purpose of supervision in public health nursing; four mentioned either staff development or improvement of patient care, and three stated that the main purpose of public health nursing supervision was improvement of patient care through staff growth and development. When asked about what they thought were other purposes of supervision in public health nursing, the following responses were obtained: eleven staff nurses, six of whom had mentioned staff development in stating the main purpose of supervision, repeated staff development as another purpose of public health nursing supervision. Six stated that another purpose was that of guidance in problem solving, while five
TABLE I

VIEWS ON THE PURPOSES OF SUPERVISION HELD BY FIFTEEN PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Main purpose</th>
<th>Other purposes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program planning and overseeing of work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of patient care through staff development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of patient care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and counseling in problem solving</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of needs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

gave evaluation of needs of the staff, as still another purpose. One believed orientation of the staff to be another purpose of public health nursing supervision.

From the responses received to a question about the ways in which staff nurses thought supervisors could promote
a feeling of belonging to the agency in which they worked, there evolved the following description of the supervisor in public health nursing: a person who created and maintained a friendly atmosphere; was enthusiastic about her work as well as that of the staff nurse and took pride in the agency in which she worked; showed interest in the staff nurse; introduced the nurse to her new responsibilities; respected her as an individual as well as a nurse; recognized each worker's ability and delegated responsibility according to this ability; enlisted the participation of the staff nurse in planning new programs and in-service education; gave praise for a job well done; offered constructive criticism; was fair, impartial, able to listen; had insight into other people's problems; and was understanding and reassuring.

Five questions dealt with the activities of the supervisor in relation to staff development and ways in which the supervisor was most helpful. The responses to these questions were categorized under five broad headings. Table II shows the responses.

The responses giving the activities of the supervisor in rendering general assistance to public health staff nurses were as follows: fifteen stated that solving field
# TABLE II

FIFTEEN PUBLIC HEALTH STAFF NURSES' VIEWS OF SUPERVISORS' ACTIVITIES AND WAYS IN WHICH THE SUPERVISOR IS MOST HELPFUL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>What supervisor does</th>
<th>Ways supervisor is most helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General assistance in:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solving field problems</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>record and report writing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promoting health education in all areas</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maintaining good interpersonal relations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and counseling in solving patient and personal problems</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation (creates and maintains a democratic atmosphere, assists new nurses with their responsibilities)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (provides in-service education)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of needs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program planning and overseeing of work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
problems was one activity; fourteen stated assistance given in record and report writing to be another activity of the supervisor; seven stated promoting health supervision in all areas as still another activity of the supervisor; and three mentioned maintaining good interpersonal relations as a further activity in assisting public health staff nurses. Guidance and counseling in solving patient and personal problems was mentioned as an activity of the public health nursing supervisor by all the respondents. Another activity, as stated by eleven of the respondents, was orientation of the staff. Nine participants gave education and evaluation of needs of the staff as two more activities of the supervisor and eight mentioned program planning and overseeing of the work as still another activity.

When asked about the ways in which the public health nursing supervisor had been most helpful to them, eight said that the supervisor had been most helpful in assisting with record and report writing. Seven found the supervisor most helpful in promoting health supervision in all areas. Even though maintaining good interpersonal relations had been stated as an activity of the supervisor in rendering general assistance, none of the respondents mentioned this activity as a way in which the supervisor had been most
helpful. Guidance and counseling in solving patient and personal problems was stated by eleven of the participants as being the way in which the supervisor had been most helpful to them. Evaluation of staff needs was considered the area in which four respondents had received the most help from the supervisor. Two staff nurses mentioned program planning and overseeing of the work as an activity of the supervisor which had been most helpful to them.

These findings were in keeping with the functions of the public health nursing supervisor as stated in the American Nurses' Association\(^1\) statement of functions, standards and qualifications for public health nurses. It was also apparent that the views of the respondents closely paralleled the description of the functions and activities of the supervisor as found in the other literature.

When queried as to the ways in which the supervisor was least helpful, all said there were no areas in which the supervisor was not helpful. When asked to state some areas in which some or more supervision might be welcome, two respondents said that they had been in public health

\(^1\)American Nurses' Association, op. cit.
nursing for many years and felt they could perform effectively with the supervision they now received. Five respondents said that they would welcome more supervision in all areas and seven mentioned the following areas in which they could profit by more supervision: nutrition, mental health, health supervision, communicable disease, maternal and child health and record writing. In addition, five nurses, in public health nursing under two years, stated that without supervision they would have been and would still be lost. These five stated that their field experience in public health nursing as students had been limited mostly to care of the chronically ill patient. These nurses felt that they needed a great deal of guidance in the area of health supervision in order to be more effective in promoting health.

To a question about the methods through which the supervisor could contribute to the solving of problems in family situations, fifteen respondents said that the supervisor could help by having a knowledge of existing community facilities that could be utilized in solving problems in family situations. Eleven stated that the supervisor could be helpful by being available to discuss family problems, and two mentioned the supervisor could be of
assistance in solving problems in family situations by being able to identify problems.

Lastly, the respondents were asked whether they preferred working in an agency providing public health nursing supervision or in one without supervision. All preferred to be employed in an agency providing supervision for the following reasons: ten said that supervision provided for staff development; six stated that everyone needs supervision and guidance in the performance of his duties; six said that it is good to have someone to turn to as it relieves one of the responsibility of making decisions alone in problem solving; and one stated supervision is needed to assure good service to the community.

The findings of this study do not substantiate the hypothesis which was, that public health staff nurses have limited ideas regarding the purposes of public health nursing supervision.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The study was undertaken to determine what public health staff nurses thought about public health nursing supervision. It was hypothesized that public health staff nurses had limited ideas about the purposes of public health nursing supervision.

An interview schedule of nineteen questions served as the tool for obtaining the information. All the public health staff nurses, fifteen in number, employed by three visiting nurse associations located in three cities in one state in New England were the respondents. Five of the participants were under twenty-five years of age; seven were between thirty-six and fifty years of age; and three were in the fifty-one to sixty-five year age group. Six respondents had been employed in public health nursing less than two years, while nine respondents had been employed in public health nursing from two to eighteen years. All respondents except one had always worked in a public health agency which provided supervision. Twelve of the respondents were graduates of diploma schools; the other three were graduates of basic collegiate schools. Three
of the diploma school graduates had received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1959, making a total of six out of fifteen staff nurses, who had baccalaureate degrees. Four other respondents were currently taking courses; and five had no further education other than the three years in a diploma school of nursing. All except one of the staff nurses were members of one or more professional organizations.

The findings of this study revealed that:

1. Eight nurses gave program planning and over-seeing the work as the main purpose of supervision in public health nursing. Six others viewed either staff development or improvement of patient care as the main purpose of supervision. Staff development, guidance and counseling in problem solving, evaluation of staff needs, and orientation of the staff were the other purposes of supervision mentioned.

2. The public health nursing supervisor was seen as a person who created and maintained a friendly atmosphere; was enthusiastic about her work as well as that of the staff nurse and took pride in the agency in which she worked; showed interest in the staff nurse; introduced the nurse to her new responsibilities; respected her as an individual as well as a nurse; recognized each worker's ability and delegated responsibility according to this ability; enlisted the participation of the staff nurse in planning new programs and in-service education; gave praise for a job well done; offered constructive criticism; was fair, impartial, able to listen; had insight into other people's problems; and was understanding and reassuring.
3. The activities of the supervisor in giving general assistance to public health staff nurses were as follows: all stated solving field problems as an activity; nearly half stated promoting health supervision in all areas as still another activity of the supervisor and a few mentioned maintaining good interpersonal relations as a further activity in assisting public health staff nurses. Other activities of the public health nursing supervisor mentioned by the public health staff nurses, in relation to staff development, were: orientation of the staff, education, evaluation of staff needs and program planning and overseeing of the work.

4. The majority of the respondents viewed the supervisor as being most helpful, primarily, in guiding and counseling when patient and personal problems arose. Other areas in which the supervisor was considered to be most helpful were: solving field problems, assistance given in report and record writing, promotion of health education in all areas of the work, evaluation of staff needs, and program planning and overseeing of the work.

5. All of the staff nurses, participating in the study, considered the public health nursing supervisor to be helpful in all areas of the work.

6. Seven staff nurses felt that they could profit by more supervision in nutrition, mental health, health instruction, communicable disease, maternal and child health, and record writing.

7. Five respondents, in public health nursing under two years, felt that they needed a great deal of supervision, in the area of health supervision, to be more effective in promoting health.

8. Most of the respondents believed that the supervisor could contribute in solving
problems in family situations by having a knowledge of existing community facilities that could be utilized in solving problems in family situations, and by being readily available to discuss the problems.

9. All the participants preferred to be employed in an agency providing public health nursing supervision.

Conclusions

It may be concluded from the findings of this study that:

1. Public health staff nurses view program planning and overseeing of the work as the main purpose of supervision. Guidance and counseling in problem solving, evaluation of staff needs, orientation of the staff, staff development, and improvement of patient care are seen by them as other purposes of supervision.

2. Public health staff nurses view the public health nursing supervisor as a democratic person who has the ability to create and maintain a friendly atmosphere; and one who respects each individual.

3. Public health staff nurses are aware of the activities of the supervisor as related to the function of staff development.

4. Public health staff nurses view the supervisor, primarily, as a problem solver.

5. Public health staff nurses consider the supervisor to be helpful in all areas of the work.

6. Public health staff nurses would profit by more
supervision in nutrition, mental health, health supervision, communicable disease, maternal and child health and record writing.

7. Public health staff nurses, beginning to work in public health nursing, need a great deal of supervision in the area of health supervision.

8. Public health staff nurses, with many years in the practice of public health nursing, need less supervision.

9. Public health staff nurses believe that the supervisor can contribute in solving problems in family situations by having a knowledge of community resources and by being readily available to discuss the problems.

10. Public health staff nurses prefer to be employed in an agency providing public health nursing supervision.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are presented:

1. That a similar study be done with a larger population of public health staff nurses.

2. That a comparative study be done to determine the views of public health staff nurses and public health nursing supervisors regarding the main purpose of supervision in public health nursing.

3. That a study be done to determine the difference between supervision for the beginning public health nurse and the experienced public health nurse.
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B. PERIODICALS


C. OTHER PUBLICATIONS


APPENDIX
APPENDIX

1. Public Health Staff Nurses have various opinions about the reasons for supervision. What do you think is the main purpose of having supervision in Public Health Nursing?

2. What do you think are some other reasons for supervision?

3. Most Public Health Nurses want the feeling of belonging to the agency in which they work. How do you think supervisors can help to bring about the feeling of belonging?

4. One of the functions of supervisors is to help in the development of staff nurses. How do you think supervisors can contribute to the development of staff nurses?

5. In terms of help in your work situation, what kinds of things would you discuss with your supervisor?

6. How best do you think supervisors can evaluate the development of the staff nurse?
7. Do you think these same methods would be valuable in identifying needs for further development of the staff nurse?

8. Public Health Nurses all encounter problems in family situations. How can supervisors contribute in the solution of these problems?

9. List three areas in your work in which supervision has been most helpful. In what way?

10. List three areas, if any, in your work in which supervision has been the least helpful. Why?

11. List three areas, if any, in your work in which you would welcome some or more supervision. Why?

12. Some agencies provide Public Health Nursing supervision, some agencies do not. Would you prefer to work in an agency providing supervision or in an agency with no supervision?
13. Can you tell me why?

Now I would like to ask you a few questions about yourself.

14. How long have you been doing Public Health Nursing?

Voluntary Agency with supervision?
Voluntary Agency without supervision?

Official Agency with supervision?
Official Agency without supervision?

15. From what type of nursing school did you graduate?

Diploma
Basic Collegiate

Year of Graduation

16. Have you taken any academic courses since graduation from nursing school?

Where?
When?
What?

17. Are you a member of:

1. Your hospital alumni ( )
2. American Nurses' Association ( )
3. American Public Health Association ( )
4. National League for Nursing ( )
5. Other Professional Organizations ( )
18. Do you subscribe to:

1. American Journal of Nursing ( )
2. Nursing Outlook ( )
3. Nursing Research ( )
4. American Journal of Public Health ( )
5. Other ( )

19. Would you mind specifying your age group?

1. Under 25 yrs. ( )
2. 26-30 yrs. ( )
3. 31-35 yrs. ( )
4. 36-40 yrs. ( )
5. 41-45 yrs. ( )
6. 46-50 yrs. ( )
7. 51-55 yrs. ( )
8. over 55 yrs. ( )