

# Fighting for health care on the front lines

BY RALPH R. ECHTNAW  
STAFF WRITER

Wash your hands a lot.

That's the most important advice Oakland County public health nurse Karen Seefelt can render for maintaining good health.

"Hand washing is one of the biggest things you can do to stay healthy," she said, seriously.

To illustrate her point, Seefelt noted that those little mintie on restaurant counters could be contaminated by folks who don't wash their hands after using the bathroom.

Seefelt often teaches the importance of hand washing to elementary school students, putting Crisco and sand on their hands so they'll learn to scrub like the dickens. "And in every single room a boy will raise his hand and say boys don't have to wash their hands after they pee," she said.

In the public health nursing field for 27 years now, Seefelt will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the profession this week along with Oakland County's 89 other public health nurses (all women), but not before the work is done.

Among the many duties of these women is counseling parents in the "Well Baby Clinic," visiting poor pregnant women and women with small children, and visiting schools throughout the county.

"I'm a foot soldier," Seefelt said. "Remember that."

## Free child care

Easier this week, Seefelt began her day in the Well Baby Clinic, where qualifying families can have their babies ministered to for free. "It's like a normal well-child checkup that you'd see a pediatrician do," she said.

She counseled Stephanie Jackson of Southfield regarding daughter Ariel, who is 19 months old and just received her free inoculations at the health department's Southfield office.

They covered subjects like:

■ When Ariel should begin seeing a dentist.

■ Why she's become a fussy eater.

■ How she shouldn't eat hot dogs, but rather chicken breasts.

■ Potty training.

■ And why small children occasionally rebel. ("They're like little teenagers, and they have to push at you because they're trying to be independent.")

Next it was off to visit a Farmington Hills woman who recently gave birth to her fifth child. Seefelt visits between five and seven poor pregnant women or poor women with small children every week. The idea is to teach these women how to properly care for their children, and "we're talking to the most important part of the family when we talk to (the mother)," Seefelt said.

On this particular visit, Seefelt talked with first-grade teachers Kim Wiaka and Michelle Butcher about their concerns, then found herself inspecting the head of a third-grade girl for lice.

## Big dog barking

The first mother, however,

wasn't home, leaving just a big dog to bark at Seefelt from behind a privacy fence. So Seefelt was off to deliver a plastic bag filled with baby supplies to Beverly Cazan, who lives in a trailer park near Eight Mile Road in Farmington Hills. Cazan is expecting her second child.

Noting that many people wouldn't expect to find low-income folks in Farmington Hills, Seefelt said, "Every community in the county I can take you to a place where poor people find housing."

About one-third of a public health nurse's time is comprised of visiting schools here and there. Seefelt drops in at one school a day in the Farmington and Clarenceville districts. On Mondays she stops at William Grace Elementary in Farmington Hills, where the students tend to come from low-income families.

Principal Richard Close couldn't say enough good things about Seefelt. "If we have an emergency, she's Johnny-on-the-spot," he said. "I've been in (this business) for 30 years and never had a school nurse better to work with."

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## Kill 'em

Unfortunately, she found one.

The girl's mother was called in for a talk. Seefelt recommended that the girl's clothes, coat and hat be washed, and that all her stuffed animals be sealed in a plastic bag for two weeks.

A letter will go out to the parents of all the children in the girl's class, and the West Bloomfield school district will be notified because the girl's cousin, whom she may have gotten the lice from, attends school there. The girl's mother, Seefelt said, can get free lice-killing shampoo from the county health department.

Although Seefelt loves her job — and it sure beats working the emergency room at Detroit Receiving Hospital during the 1967 riots, as she did — there aren't enough public health nurses to go around in Oakland County, she said.

"It's like juggling and there are all these balls in the air. We could probably use another 60 to 60 nurses. We're stretched real thin when we're talking about only giving an elementary school one hour of service a week."

Noting that first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton is conducting hearings on health care in the Detroit area today, Seefelt hoped that someone would be there to tell Clinton all the good things public health nurses can do.

"Not everybody takes your advice," she said. "(But) I think we do have a tangible effect on health."

And don't forget to wash your hands.



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLINSKY

We deliver: Public health nurses also visit pregnant women in their homes, giving advice and delivering layettes of baby clothing. Here Seefelt gives a layette to Beverly Cazan, a Farmington Hills mobile home resident.



Lice search: Yes, there are still lice in the schools, as Karen Seefelt, an Oakland County public health nurse, can attest. Here Seefelt searches the head of a third grader in Farmington Hills.

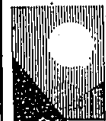


Free toothbrushes: At the county's Well Baby Clinic, public health nurses advise mothers of children under 6 on the sometimes confusing process of child-rearing. Here Ariel Jackson takes a complimentary toothbrush from Seefelt.



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