THE ALL-PURPOSE NURSE

It is a slow morning at the Singburi District Hospital, some two hours' drive north of Bangkok, Thailand. Unusual for a Monday, just one of the hospital's 10 beds is occupied and the well-baby clinic has attracted only two mothers. Outside the hospital's front door, farmers and fishermen await the barge that will ferry them across the sluggish Chao Phraya river.

The hospital's main function is to provide medical care for the 15,000 people of the district, but prevention and health promotion are also important activities. Apart from the daily outpatients clinic, special clinics are scheduled each day — dental care, well-baby clinic, maternal and child health, antenatal care, family planning, and vaccinations. School programs, as well as the supervision of outreach health centres staffed by midwives, are also part of the hospital's responsibilities.

The range of preventive and curative services rendered by the hospital accurately reflects the integrated health care program adopted in Thailand's Fourth National Health Plan (1977-81). Like most developing countries, the provision of adequate health care in rural areas has been a serious problem. Malnutrition, communicable diseases — both water-borne and vector-borne — respiratory ailments, and other illnesses take a severe toll. The death rate in rural areas is double that in the cities. More than 60 percent of the country's health personnel is located in Bangkok. In rural areas, one physician must serve up to 15,000 people.

As a result, nurses working in district hospitals and in health centres have been pressed into duty to provide types of services for which they were not prepared in their regular nursing training courses.

Rather than create a new cadre of personnel to provide additional medical care, Thailand decided to train registered nurses already working in rural areas in preventive and curative medicine (including diagnosis and treatment of minor illnesses and emergencies), in public health, and in administration. Thus the Public Health Nurse Practitioner (PH-NP) came into being in 1973. When the Faculty of Public Health of Mahidol University began a pilot program offering a one-year course leading to the PH-NP Diploma.

Encouraged by the results of the pilot project, the Ministry of Health adopted the program and, in fact, the National Health Plan calls for the training of 1400 nurse practitioners by the end of 1981.

Nurse Kammad has been at the Singburi hospital for a year now. She is one of the 60 PH-NP throughout the country who have been selected for an in-depth study by Mahidol University. Funded by IRPC, the study seeks to determine the nurse practitioners' efficiency and effectiveness, and their acceptance by the people served. It will assist the Faculty of Public Health in identifying training areas that need modification or strengthening, and aid the Ministry of Public Health in its deliberations over expanding the program.

Today, the project study team is carrying out its second observation of Nurse Kammad at work advising, examining, and treating patients. Her administrative skills are also being assessed through a review of the records she has kept and through interviews with her co-workers and patients. Patients and their families are also being asked about their degree of satisfaction with the care provided. Data on the utilization of PH-NP and the management support given them in carrying out their duties are also being collected. Finally, a cost analysis of the program will be carried out.

One older woman with a chest complaint has come this morning. Another patient is needed to complete the observation tour. Eventually — and not without some coaxing — the ferryman comes in between passengers to have a swollen ankle tended to. The diagnosis: poor blood circulation, perhaps not surprising at his age. He is 79.

The results of the evaluation, due to be completed later this year, will not only assist Thailand in determining the future orientation of the program, but should provide important information on the validity of the public health nurse practitioner approach for other countries — developing and developed — considering or implementing similar programs.

And, according to Dr Prabha Limprasut, Head of the Department of Public Health Nursing, and project coordinator, there is another benefit: It is the first time she and members of her staff have had the opportunity to visit rural hospitals, clinics, and health centres throughout the country to see the needs and problems for themselves.