



Review

A literature review exploring the preparation of mental health nurses for working with people with learning disability and mental illness



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this literature review is to explore whether mental health nurses are being appropriately prepared to care for learning disabled patients who also suffer from mental ill health. A systematic approach was adopted in order to identify relevant literature for review on the topic. Five electronic databases were searched; CINAHL, Medline, ERIC, PubMed and Scopus. Searches were limited to the years 2001–2013. A total of 13 articles were identified as relevant to the topic area for review. Three main themes were identified relating to (a) attitudes (b) practice and (c) education. There appears to be a lack of research that directly addresses this issue and the existing literature suggests that there are considerable deficits in the ability of mental health nurses to be able to provide appropriate care for those with both a learning disability and mental ill health. The findings of this review would suggest that this topic area is in urgent need of further investigation and research. Further research into this area of practice could possibly help to inform education regarding this subject at pre-registration and post qualifying levels, which could therefore in turn, improve the delivery of mental health nursing care to this particular client group.

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Introduction

The particular focus of this paper is on mental health nurse education in relation to people who have both learning disabilities and mental illness. Within this paper we use the term 'learning disability' as this is the language that is used within health and social care policy within the UK. Other terms such as 'learning difficulty' are preferred by some user-led groups, and increasingly the use of the term 'intellectual disability' or 'intellectual impairment' is being used internationally. There are advantages and disadvantages around all labels that are applied, and historically terms were used that were derogatory and dehumanising to describe people who had learning disabilities. It is imperative to recognise that all people are individuals regardless of labels, each with their own needs, gifts and strengths, and these are the values that underpin our use of the term 'learning disability' within this paper.

Background

Historically there has been little or no interest or attention paid to the emotional or mental well-being of those who have a learning disability. Indeed for many years there was a debate between professionals from different backgrounds as to whether people who have a learning disability could even become emotionally disturbed or mentally ill (Raghavan, 2007). There was little recognition of people with learning disabilities as feeling, emotional or perceptive individuals (Arthur, 2003) and the mental health of people with learning disabilities has been woefully neglected (Hatton and Taylor, 2010). Although public attitudes have generally improved toward people who have a learning disability this does not compare favourably with improved attitudes to other types of disability (Office for Disability Issues, 2010).

Learning disability has been defined as: 'A significantly reduced ability to be able to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills; a reduced ability to cope independently, which; started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development' (Department of Health (DH), 2001, p.14) and it is estimated that approximately 1.4 million people in the United Kingdom are diagnosed with a learning disability. In England it is national policy to provide people

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with learning disabilities who also experience a co-existing diagnosis of a mental illness access to mainstream mental health services (DH, 2001, 2009). The document 'Valuing People: a new strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st century' (DH, 2001) outlined the need for services to promote independence, choice, rights and inclusion and specifically stated the need for access to mainstream mental health services. However, the skills and knowledge of nurses about the differences and complexities involved in nursing learning disabled patients who are also experiencing mental ill health is often minimal (Michael, 2008; DH, 2009).

Mental ill health in an individual with a learning disability is a diagnosis that stands independently, a co-existing condition that is separate from the learning disability, and is often referred to within this client group as a dual diagnosis (Priest and Gibbs, 2004). It is now widely recognised that individuals with a learning disability are susceptible to experiencing mental illness (Clay et al., 2012), and there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that this client group are in fact more at risk of mental ill health than the general population (Borthwick-Duffy, 1994; Cooper et al., 2007; Cooper and Van der Speck, 2009). Raghavan (2007) suggests that prevalence rates of mental illness in people with learning disabilities is between 15% and 80% (2007). Despite this knowledge there are problems in recognising, identifying and diagnosing mental health problems in this client group. Health professionals may attribute symptoms of mental ill health to symptoms or behaviours of the learning disability and vice versa a process often referred to as diagnostic overshadowing (Raghavan and Patel, 2005). In addition, the assessment process for detecting mental ill health in this client group may prove much more difficult due to the individual's potential difficulty in communicating their symptoms accurately, the degree of staff knowledge and a lack of appropriate assessment tools (Priest and Gibbs, 2004; Raghavan and Patel, 2005).

Education and training in learning disabilities at both pre-registration and post-qualifying levels should ensure that mental health nurses are can effectively utilise knowledge, available frameworks, policies and guidance for the benefit of people with co-existing learning disabilities (Barriball and Clark, 2005; Gibson, 2009).

In the UK, nurses are educated in one of four nursing specialities during a three year programme: adult health nursing, mental health nursing, children and young people's nursing and learning disabilities nursing. The Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) prescribes required competencies needed to become a registered nurse in each of these specialisms. The competencies for entry to the nursing register for mental health nurses state that they must be able to provide appropriate mental health care for individuals with a learning disability (NMC, 2010) and many UK universities appear to utilise 'exposure to other fields of practice' workbooks to achieve this, the effectiveness of which is unknown. The aim of this literature review therefore is to explore how mental health nurses are being prepared to care for learning disabled patients who also experience mental ill health.

Methods

A systematic approach was adopted to search for all relevant literature; hence this paper is best described as a systemised review (Grant and Booth, 2009). A scoping exercise of the websites belonging to the Department of Health; Google Scholar; the Royal College of Nursing; the NMC; and the British Institute of Learning Disabilities revealed that literature relating to this topic was available, which was relevant in the current nursing, research and political contexts. To focus the search the PEO (population, exposure, outcome) framework (Khan et al., 2003) was used to develop

the search question: How are mental health nurses prepared to care for people with learning disabilities in mainstream mental health settings? The inclusion criteria was; English language, papers published since 2001 (following the 'Valuing People' (DH 2001) document), and papers relating to adults. Four main keywords were identified and synonyms identified from those which can be seen in Table 1.

Combinations of these terms using the Boolean operator AND were conducted in the databases, CINAHL, MEDLINE, PubMed, Scopus and ERIC. Firstly papers were identified that matched the inclusion criteria from the reading of their title and abstract in order to manage the volume of information as per guidance (NHS CRD, 2009; Bettany-Saltikov, 2012). The remaining papers were then read in full. A total of 13 articles were included in the final review.

Findings and discussion

The origin of the primary research papers could be identified as: UK (Barriball and Clark, 2005; Clark, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Donner et al., 2010; Bollard et al., 2012; Read and Rushton, 2013; Rose et al., 2012a, 2012b), US (Hahn, 2003), Netherlands (Klooster et al., 2009) New Zealand (Taua and Farrow, 2009; Taua et al., 2012) and Israel (Werner and Stawski, 2012). Of the 13 articles included, three distinct categories were apparent which will be discussed:

- 1) attitudes
- 2) practice issues
- 3) education and training

Attitudes

Three papers were identified that directly related to health care staff, qualified nurses, and student nurses attitudes towards those with a learning disability (Klooster et al., 2009; Rose et al., 2012a; Werner and Stawski, 2012). All raised issues regarding the difficulty that negative attitudes had on the ability of individuals to access to mainstream mental health services and on recovery, rehabilitation and self-esteem. Staff attitudes can directly affect the quality of care delivered to all patients (Rose et al., 2012a). This means that people with learning disabilities and mental ill health can be prevented from utilising services they need (Werner and Stawski, 2012).

With a convenience sample of 81 student nurses, Klooster et al. (2009) compared attitudes with a group of non-nursing peers

Table 1
Keywords and synonyms.

Initial keywords from question and PEO framework:	Synonyms
Mental health nurses	Mental health nursing Psychiatric nursing Psychiatric nurses Mental health
Prepared	Education Knowledge Pre-registration education Pre-registration nurse education Post qualifying education
Learning disabilities	Intellectual disabilities Mental retardation
Care	

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