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What is learning disability nursing?

Defining learning disability nursing... this is to:

'skilfully assess the social and health care needs of people with learning disabilities and, or, this families, in order to assist them to live as independently as possible. The nurse will achieve this by marshalling their skills as manager, enabler and co-ordinator of services, and will demonstrate that their evidence-based interventions lead to health maintenance and/or gain. The nurse will practice their craft autonomously yet interdependently with other colleagues from a variety of other academic disciplines, and service agencies in a variety of settings, in partnership with people with learning disabilities to assist them to lead valued lifestyles. This role will require them to develop and refine their knowledge and competence in a range of skills in order to meet the changing needs of people with learning disabilities.'

Gates, 1997, 16 – 17

The learning disability nurse:

Assesses the social and healthcare needs of people with learning disability

Works with people with learning disability, and their family, to provide the level of support required, across the life span

Prepares and delivers robust care plans based on a systematic nursing assessment

Is willing to develop knowledge and competence to broaden their skills to meet the changing needs of people with learning disability

Works both independently and as part of a team of healthcare and support providers

Supports parents when children are young, adolescents, adults and older people with learning disability

Works in the community, hospitals (as liaison nurses), NHS specialist units, day services, prisons, hospices, special schools

Uses their skills as manager, enabler and co-ordinator of services

The result is a positive contribution of the learning disability nurse to the health and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities to enjoy quality lives



Introduction

Learning disability nursing is a person-centred profession whose primary aim is to support people with learning disabilities either directly or indirectly through improving or maintaining their health and wellbeing, and bringing about their social inclusion in their communities.

What do learning disability nurses do?

Learning disability nurses work with people with learning disabilities from birth through to death, those who may require a range of supports throughout their lives. This support will range from none, or minimal, support through to intensive holistic nursing care aimed at meeting the multidimensional needs of people with learning disabilities. Much of the care planning and delivery of learning disability takes place in local community settings. Learning disability nurses must be competent in preparing robust, professionally prepared care plans based on a systematic nursing assessment. Much evidence exists of the positive contribution of learning disability nurses to the lives of people with learning disabilities. Learning disability nurses currently work in a wide range of organisational settings that include the NHS, local authorities and the third sector. Typically they are likely to work in inter-professional teams and for a variety of agencies. Recent changes in health and social care are dictating new and exciting roles that are being undertaken by learning disability nurses, for example nurses working in mainstream healthcare teams in acute hospitals, mental health services and primary care. The *Strengthening the Commitment Learning Disability Nursing* (UK, Chief Nursing Officers, 2012) report has asserted that learning disability nurses are needed to ensure that people with learning disabilities of all ages, today and tomorrow, have access to the expert learning disabilities nursing they need, want and deserve. Three primary areas of practice in the NHS are:

- Health facilitation – supporting mainstream access.
- Inpatient services – for example, assessment and treatment, and secure services.
- Specialist roles – in community learning disability teams.

Other, broader, developments in healthcare roles, such as the modern matron, specialist epilepsy nurses and nurse prescribers are all providing new areas of practice for learning disability nurses. Also learning disability nurses work as consultants who are able to offer valuable clinical, supervisory expertise along with both regional and national professional leadership.

The purist form of nursing – the context of learning disability nursing

Learning disability nursing is often referred to as the purist form of nursing; unlike colleagues in other fields of nursing, they do not concentrate on specific manifestations of physical ill health or trauma, or mental health and wellbeing, or children, or childbirth for that matter; rather they offer support to people with learning

disabilities, and their families that is all embracing and quite literally from the cradle through to the grave. In order to offer competent, compassionate and comprehensive nursing interventions that meet the multidimensional needs of people with learning disability, it is helpful to adopt a structured approach to working. A comprehensive needs assessment (physical, psychological, social, spiritual and emotional) should first be completed. If a nurse is required to work with someone with learning disabilities and their family, it is necessary that their needs are assessed and incorporated into an individual care plan, taking their desires, wishes and aspirations into account. The nurse must work closely with the client's family, care providers, and other professionals, as this approach will bring very important and essential information, as well as informing the development of a care plan, its approach, delivery and management. This detailed assessment is followed by the construction of a written care plan that is implemented, and followed up with ongoing review/s and evaluation/s. This very structured approach, using partnership working, and incorporating the multidimensionality of people, coupled with the person at the heart of planning, ensures that learning disability nurses provide holistic person-centred care and support.

A modelled approach

In response to social and political influences, learning disability care and models of support, care planning has changed considerably over recent years, as has the practice of learning disability nurses. For example, during the last century, many people with learning disabilities were located in asylums and, or, long-stay hospitals that were dominated by a medical model of care, emphasising the biological needs of people, and the need to 'cure' physical problems. Most people with learning disabilities have now moved out of long-stay hospitals, but there remains a concern that the powerful effects of the medical model may continue to influence care provided in smaller community-based residences. It has been argued that the use of the medical model in the past pathologised and objectified people with learning disabilities, leading to them being seen as '*less than human*'. Therefore, nurses need to consider adopting a 'nursing model' to guide their care in practice, to ensure that they offer holistic nursing support. The use of any model must hold the person with learning disabilities central to the care planning process, and all must be mindful that they use a model to promote what is best for that person. There are numerous nursing models that can be adapted and used in health and social care settings. Some nursing models are regularly used in learning disability nursing practice. An example of a useful nursing model is that of Roper, Logan and Tierney (2002) this is well known and widely used within nursing profession. The model focuses on holistic care and is based on the concept of health rather than illness and disease. The model focuses on understanding the needs of people in terms of the activities of daily living they perform. The model embraces the idea that independence and dependence operate along a continuum relating to each activity of living separately.