

CHAPTER 1

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN MENTAL HEALTH NURSING: AN INTRODUCTION

Jonathon E. Lynch and
Steve Trenoweth

This book addresses a number of contemporary issues affecting mental health nurses and the worlds that they and their clients inhabit. We are certain that many, if not all, contributions will also be of interest to users of mental health services and to mental health professionals in other disciplines, and some even to people who have no direct connection to mental health care.

The themes covered could only ever be a sample of those that are of significance today; they could only ever be *some* of the contemporary issues that affect us in the sense that the dynamics of current mental health care bring us all into contact with an ever-increasing number and range of influences, drivers and problems. An analysis of the pace of the changes in the last 10–15 years could be the subject of an entire book on its own! So, too, could the volume of legislation that has touched professional life, whether through direct or indirect influences, and the social ramifications of what Beck (1992) termed the ‘risk society’. Although this has perhaps been most visible in the United Kingdom at airports and in city centres in recent years, it has also been evident in the ways in which we carry out and document our clinical care, our interventions and our assessments. So, nurses and other mental health care professionals

carry out their daily work within societies, and indeed within a world, that has altered profoundly in a couple of decades.

Change is not new to us – it is one of the few things we can be certain will occur! Our nursing predecessors created it, lived with it and coped with it. The contemporary issues presented and considered here may become less significant in the future, and perhaps this will be so even for the authors who deem them important today. Nevertheless, their intention in this volume is to illustrate some of the contemporary complexities, problems, challenges and dilemmas that they feel are faced by service users and mental health nurses alike. In so doing, they provide valid, and we believe useful, insights into the expanding and developing body of critical literature available for practitioners and students of mental health care to draw upon.

If the purpose of this book were to be summed up, it is simply to contribute to the analysis and stimulation of thought about mental health nursing practice and mental health care more widely. As Professor Peter Nolan mentions in his Foreword, several decades ago the available literature on mental health nursing could be read within days. Today, such works are relatively abundant but the critical element in particular has room for improvement and growth, as does that containing other commentaries that fall outside the ‘how to’ textbook style. While there will always be a need and a market for the latter, the chapters that follow all offer contributions to discussions and dilemmas that touch many spheres of service users’ and mental health nurses’ lives today.

All of the authors are based in England and their contributions are inevitably focused on matters there as they perceive them today. Overall then, the book’s contents are inevitably framed by the health care practices and legislation of England and Wales. However, we believe that most, if not all, of the issues are pertinent to the rest of the United Kingdom. We also consider the text to be pertinent and useful to peers further away. In particular, the literature from Australia and from New Zealand, and from parts of northern Europe and North America, seems to indicate that mental health nurses in these areas encounter, and attempt to respond to, many similar issues. Certainly, there is much for us to learn from how other countries address mental health issues, and we have much to gain from understanding the practices and insights that peers abroad have to offer. Indeed, some form of ‘globalization’ of mental health nursing care could well enhance understandings, critical thought and evidence bases internationally, and in turn our responsiveness to improving the health care experiences of mentally unwell people around the world.

Each section of this book begins with an overview, which seeks to introduce chapters that are thematically linked. We have attempted to use the overviews to help readers make sense of the whole. Indeed, rather than a collection of unconnected essays, this book attempts to raise and complement awareness of some of the key issues of today and to draw out unifying themes. One such theme is the increasing influence of the political issues that appear to stamp indelible marks on everyday events. Some social scientists would deem all aspects of mental health care ‘political’ in nature, yet we

would argue that any such dialogue is weakened if it fails to take into consideration the entire nature of the subject area. Despite its weaknesses, mental health care in this country *is* striving, sometimes extremely successfully, to assist those who are in need of help with their 'mental health' as we understand the concept today.

However, there are aspects of this book which are quite critical of contemporary mental health nursing practice and of mental health care in general. Some issues that are raised are controversial; some are disturbing. Some are rarely found in mental health nursing books. Readers may not agree with the conclusions that the authors have drawn. Issues are highlighted so as to stimulate discussion and debate, and begin a genuine dialogue as to how we may rectify relevant issues. However, we must also be able to balance such problems with an appreciation, and indeed celebration, of our professional strengths. Indeed, as mental health nurses ourselves, we are optimistic and ever hopeful that our profession can respond meaningfully to the needs of those we seek to care for, and deliver the sort of care and support service users want.

