

Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales Learning disability nursing paper summary

Learning disability nurses are needed wherever an individual with a learning disability has complex healthcare needs and requires specialist care and support. The role of learning disability nursing should be celebrated and valued for the highly skilled, compassionate role that it is.

What is a learning disability nurse and why are they important?

A learning disability nurse provides specialist healthcare and support for people with a learning disability, their families, and staff teams. Most people with learning disabilities experience long term conditions, with 46% of people experiencing seven or more long-term conditions. 98% of people with a learning disability have been prescribed medication, and the average number of medications a person with learning disabilities is prescribed is 6.2. Identifying and treating the health needs of a person with a learning disability can be complicated by communication difficulties, unusual presentations of symptoms, and diagnostic overshadowing.

Learning disability nurses require an in-depth knowledge of rights-based legislation and this involves recognition that some people with a learning disability who require healthcare service users can experience care as coercive and learning disability nurses have legal duties in this context. The current Nursing Midwifery Council (NMC) competencies state that registered nurses need to act in a manner which minimises the power imbalance between the nurse and service user in the unique context of compulsory care.

Learning disability nurses may work within environments including secure units and criminal justice organisations where there is an immediate imbalance of power which can leave some of our most vulnerable citizens open to abuse (Winterbourne, 2011). It is essential that people with a learning disability who need specialist nursing services can access this and be assured that those delivering their care are registered competent practitioners.

From early years to older age, learning disability nurses should be able to provide care and support for a person with a learning disability and their family and carers.

Recommendations

- Health Boards must ensure learning disability nurses are embedded in every aspect of care, including primary, community and secondary care. To do this, significant investment is needed in pre and post registration learning disability nursing.
- The Welsh Government should publish guidance for managing the transition from child to adult services. As part of this the Welsh Government should ensure a consistent approach is taken by health boards and trusts to managing transition from the age of 14 to 25. Learning disability nurses must be able to support an individual with a learning disability on their journey through this process from childhood to older age.
- Care must be available to be delivered in Welsh. NHS Wales must ensure the Welsh language field on the NHS Electronic Staff Record is mandatory and the Welsh Government must publish this data to ensure effective workforce planning and delivery of care in Welsh.
- The Welsh Government must seek to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with a learning disability and ensure any potential negative effects of the pandemic are mitigated and people with learning disability are considered in plans for 'living with Covid' and recovery.
- NHS Wales must ensure the learning disability educational framework for healthcare staff in Wales, developed by Improvement Cymru and University South Wales in memory of Paul Ridd, is fully and consistently implemented across the NHS.
- The Welsh Government must ensure there are enough learning disability nurses in Wales to provide support for people throughout their lifespan including: early year, child and adolescent services, adult services, older age and end of life care. This must include increasing pre-registration learning disability nursing and post-registration nursing education.
- The Welsh Government must ensure every health board and trust in Wales has at least one learning disability consultant nurse. Health boards, higher education providers, social care and independent providers must also ensure they have a pathway for learning disability nurses to progress in their careers.
- NHS Wales and employers must facilitate time for nurses to study, Health Education and Improvement Wales must commission post-registration nursing education and universities must establish learning disability consultant nurse and advance nursing courses.
- The Welsh Government must ensure accurate information on out of area and out of country placements is collated and published. Independent and social care providers must invest in learning disability nursing to ensure care should be provided closer to home.