In 2012 the chief officers of the UK’s four governments published a report into the challenges currently faced by services and staff in the delivery of high quality nursing care to people with learning disability. Claire Harries reviews the report.

Strengthening the Commitment to Learning Disability Nursing

Strengthening the Commitment (Scottish Government, 2012) is a report of the Modernising Learning Disabilities Review by the chief nursing officers of the UK’s four governments. The report identifies the challenges currently faced by learning disability nurses, employers and the service as a whole in ensuring the delivery of high quality nursing care for people with learning disabilities, both now and in the future.

**Why did we need a review?**

Learning disability nurses can often play a vital role in the lives of people with learning disabilities. This extends to involvement with their families, carers and other professionals. There have been significant changes to the role of the learning disability nurse over the last thirty years and it is likely that this will continue to evolve in the future. There have been many positive reforms in the way care has been provided, with moves from the old institutionalised model to more community based care and a greater focus on empowerment and inclusion. Although this has greatly improved the lives of people with learning disabilities, it has had the effect of reducing the perceived demand for learning disability nurses. Thanks to the great work of healthcare professionals and carers, many more children born with a learning disability are leading healthy lives and surviving into adolescence and adulthood. The number of people with a learning disability, who are now entering old age, has also increased. A review was needed so that the government could identify whether or not there is going to be a requirement for more learning disability nurses in the future and if there should be any changes to the way in which they carry out their training and do their job once qualified.

**What is needed?**

A clear direction and focus for learning disability nursing is essential. This will help ensure that people with learning disabilities will have access to the skill and expertise that is provided by the highly specialised learning disability nurse. It is important that we are able to provide a workforce that can meet both current and future demand which is directly linked to the changing needs of people with learning disabilities. The review makes 17 recommendations about what needs to change. There are four clear principles identified to supporting the reform of learning disability nursing in the UK.

**Strengthening capacity;** the governments needs to know where learning disability nurses are currently working and the specific nature of their employment. It is thought that many have taken positions in more general roles as opposed to the learning disability sector. There are also many learning disability nurses working within the independent sector but reliable data is not available regarding this. This information is vital for strategic workforce planning and development.

**Strengthening capability;** this is about maximising the contribution that can be made by the learning disability nurse in supporting access to services and contributing to the prevention of illness and deterioration of existing conditions by using the skills, knowledge and competencies that form the strong value base required to reflect the changing needs of people with learning disabilities.

**Strengthening quality;** the learning disability nurse must be able to demonstrate their impact to the life of a person with a learning disability. This can only be done through achieving measurable outcomes. It is important that this evidence based information is used to achieve further improvements in
quality. Unfortunately, people with learning disabilities still experience inequalities in access to acute healthcare services. Strengthening the Commitment recommends that, commissioners and providers of health and social care, should ensure that learning disabilities nurses are able to collaborate effectively with general health services. Through the solid preparation and development of nursing staff at all levels, high quality healthcare for people with learning disabilities should be achieved.

**Strengthening the profession; strong leadership and management among learning disability nurses across Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, with the common goal of achieving quality services for people with learning disabilities, is essential.**

**Strengthening the Commitment: One year on.**

In April, this year, a unique event took place at the Metropole Hotel, Llandrindod Wells. The purpose of the Modernising Learning Disability Nursing stakeholder’s event was to report on progress and celebrate achievements made during the course of the last year. Professor Jean White, Chief Nursing Officer, Welsh Government, stated that a work plan for delivering ‘Strengthening the Commitment’, together with implementation groups in each Local Health Board throughout Wales, was essential so that we may ‘modify current working practices in order to meet the needs of the learning disabled people in our communities’. Professor White asserted that developing nurses with the right ‘value base’ is of great importance for the future of nursing in Wales, and the UK. A sense of great passion was evident in Professor White’s personal commitment to strengthening the nursing profession in Wales. A series of presentations highlighting the developments taking place across Wales with Dr Robert Jenkins reporting that learning disability is integrated into all fields of practice in undergraduate nursing courses, at the University of South Wales. The current undergraduate programme has specialist learning disability modules in all three years of study. Particularly pleasing, was the feedback from Learning Disability students, who clearly benefited from such an upbeat occasion.

“For me, attending the Strengthening the Commitment stakeholder’s event brought the report to life. I gained a much clearer perspective of how the planned changes to modernise learning disability nursing would implemented. It made perfect sense that because people with learning disabilities are now living longer their health needs will change and as such the recommendations in the report are both important and necessary if we are to be able to support people with learning disabilities effectively in the future.” - Jane Williams, Third Year Learning Disability Nursing Student

“The sheer can do attitude of every individual involved gave me as a student learning disability nurse the motivation and positivity to help move services forward and I feel very honoured to be embarking on such a rewarding role.” - Michelle Davies, newly qualified Learning Disability Nurse.

**Conclusion**

One year after being published, ‘Strengthening the Commitment’ has given a specificity to the current and future role of the Learning Disability nurse. Although we have had nursing strategies before, what is different this time is that we have clear implementation plans and monitoring groups set up at Health Board, all Wales and UK levels. Within Wales, the first year report of progress has been submitted to the Chief Nursing Officer. This identifies progress made to date as well as priority areas for further development. The visceral passion of learning disability nurses will ensure that changes to the profession will be embraced positively in order to achieve the best possible care for people with learning disabilities.

**Reference**


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