Mental Health Nurse Academics (UK)

Position Paper 1

Educational Support for Post-Qualifying Career Structures in Mental Health Nursing

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Mental Health Nurse Academics (UK) brings together representatives from all UK Higher Education Institutions engaged in mental health nursing education and research. The group advises on issues related to mental health nursing and shares good practice and innovation in this field.

This first Position Paper from Mental Health Nurse Academics (UK) focuses on education and training for qualified mental health nurses. The Paper is aimed at commissioners and providers of mental health education, national and local policy makers, practitioners, and all other groups with an interest in how mental health nurses are prepared for roles in practice, management, and education and research.

Mental Health Nurse Academics (UK) believes:

1. The commissioning and provision of post-qualifying mental health and social care education should support the diverse needs of mental health nurses.
2. Education should value and support the care, compassion and interpersonal traditions of mental health nursing.
3. Education should be evidence-based and develop skills for practice.
4. Education for mental heath nurses should develop practitioners who place people in receipt of services at the centre of care.
5. Education should reflect the interprofessional and collaborative context of contemporary mental health service provision.
6. Education should be needs-based.
7. Provision of education should be based on partnership between higher education institutions, employers, commissioning bodies and service user representatives.
8. Education should develop and support mental health nurses able to participate in and lead research activity.

Summary

The provision of direct face-to-face interventions to mental health service users, the design and delivery of education to mental health nurses and the management and leadership of mental health services should all be cognisant of the evidence base. Nursing career paths should be informed by education and training derived from the available evidence base. Education initiatives should be designed in partnership with interested stakeholders including service users and carers. The commissioning and provision of education should also be responsive to the multiple career pathways that mental health nurses might follow, and recognise and respect both the distinctiveness of mental health nursing and the multi-professional context in which nurses work.

Mental Health Nursing Career Pathways

MHNA(UK) acknowledges that three broad career pathways exist for mental health nurses. These are *Practice* (therapeutic work in both statutory and non-statutory settings with recipients of mental health care), *Managerial* and *Academic* (a likely mix of educative and research functions with perhaps some opting to follow a particular exclusive route in one area). The commissioning and provision of post-qualifying mental health and social care education to be accessed by mental health nurses should recognise these multiple routes and ensure provision is available to address needs at basic through to advanced levels. However, the pathways should not be seen as mutually exclusive, and many mental health nurses choose a mix of these as a career structure. Examples include lecturer

practitioner roles, which combine clinical or managerial responsibilities with an academic role and nurse consultants who often combine elements drawn from all three pathways.

Diversity of Clinical Provision

MHNA(UK) sees the need for the provision of mental health specific educational input for mental health nurses for clinical practice. We assert the need for educational provision that supports the therapeutic work and diverse roles of mental health nurses and others working in the mental health field. We support the provision of education which is most usefully shared between all mental health professional and non-professionally aligned groups. As a discrete occupational group, mental health nurses require educational provision that values the interpersonal nature of mental health nursing, is informed by the evidence base and is orientated towards service user and carer needs.

Psycho-social intervention type courses can be useful in preparing mental health nurses for working with people with serious mental illnesses. However provision is patchy and alternative practice priorities are poorly addressed. For example, education is less well-developed for nurses specialising in acute inpatient mental health care, child and adolescent mental health nursing, nursing older people, primary care mental health nursing, working with people with personality disorder and those with co-existing mental health problems and substance misuse.

All stakeholders, including education commissioning bodies, higher education institutions and NHS trusts have a responsibility to support the educational preparation of practitioners working in these and other priority areas.

Needs-Based Education

MHNA(UK) concludes that all mental health nursing educational provision should be built upon up-to-date assessments of service users' mental health needs and mental health nurses' educational needs. Provision should be based on a critical understanding of the evidence, should develop skills for practice, and should reflect the interprofessional and collaborative context of contemporary mental health service provision. Mental health nursing education should develop approaches that place the person in receipt of services and their families at the centre of care. The education of mental health nurses should value the compassion and care traditions of the profession as a basis for offering evidence-based therapeutic interventions.

Partnership in Developing Educational Provision

MHNA(UK) believes that the commissioning of education to support the various strands of clinical practice careers, management and academic pathways should be based on a partnership between higher education institutions, health and social care employers, commissioning bodies and service user representatives. This commissioning should be based on needs assessment, address national and local priority groups and ensure that educational provision is built on the best available evidence for practice.

Research capacity

MHNA(UK) believes that increasing research capacity within mental health nursing is key to improving the quality and effectiveness of mental health provision. Mental health nurses are the largest specialist mental health professional group and their ability to meet National Service Framework and other national standards will be greatly enhanced by an improved research capacity. Building the research capacity of the profession should include creative approaches to funding research secondments from clinical practice for interested practitioners and clinical secondments for academics. We recognise and support the important developments in providing research training and post-doctoral fellowships provided by organisations such as the Department of Health, the Scottish Executive and through charities such as The Health Foundation. These developments, however, are insufficient to develop and sustain the research capacity of the profession and more needs to be done.