



Mental Health Nurse Academics (UK)

Promoting and advancing UK Mental Health Nursing education, research, policy and practice

Rt Hon Dr Dawn Primarolo MP
Minister of State for Public Health
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

29/10/07

Dear Dr Primarolo,

Re: Best Research for Best Health and the new National Institute for Health Research – impact on Mental Health Nursing Research

Mental Health Nurses Academics (UK) brings together representatives from all UK Higher Education Institutions engaged in mental health nursing research and education. On behalf of this group I am writing to express concern about the impact that the new NHS research funding mechanisms might have on Mental Health Nursing research.

Whilst we acknowledge some of the rationales behind these changes we believe that they may threaten the continued development of research in Mental Health Nursing, a matter of major concern to the profession. Mental Health Nursing is one of the largest mental health professional groups within the UK and in terms of their contribution to research specifically is seen as a world leader. No other country (including the US) currently produces the volume, output and quality research of leading academic Mental Health Nurses. That output is evidenced in journals across the psychiatric spectrum (not just those related specifically related to nursing), and often involves partnerships and collaborations with academics from other professions, service users and carers. The premier Mental Health Nursing peer reviewed journal, produced in the UK, now attracts contributions from across the globe, is listed for an impact factor, has a growing number of submissions, and is increasing the number of issues per year. Mental Health Nursing researchers speak at and contribute to major national and international conferences, are part of the policy development process within CSIP and the DH, and review grant applications for the major national research councils and funding bodies. All these indicators demonstrate the key contribution that UK Mental Health Nurse researchers are making towards the development and modernisation of psychiatric care in the NHS within the UK and more globally.

However, this very healthy picture we believe is now under threat. One key issue is that more than half of Mental Health Nursing Chairs within the UK are at least 50% funded by the NHS. This funding stream is currently being centrally clawed back in order to fund a range of different initiatives as a result of the *'Best Research for Best Health'* review and the foundation of the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR). Whilst many of these initiatives are exciting new developments, in which Mental Health Nursing Researchers will play a crucial role, unfortunately it seems likely that there is

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a very real risk that important continued funding of academic leaders in Mental Health Nursing will be lost or abandoned during a massive and complex period of change.

Of the new types of funding available, none seem to take proper account of the high degree of dependence of leading Mental Health Nursing academics on this funding stream for their core resources (i.e. their salaries and their support staff). Year on year the traditional funding stream is being cut in order to fund new NIHR projects and institutions. This is placing those academics resourced in this way under pressure at the very same time that there is evidence that MPET budgets (used to fund nurse education) are being cut or utilised for other means and many Schools of Nursing are running into deficit. Thus, the other key source of funding which might support these same academics is at the same time also being threatened. We are entering a period of major risk for the nascent mental health nursing research community just at the point when it is developing its role and starting to make a full contribution to research in psychiatric services as a whole. Some of the key leadership posts essential to the continuation of this important contribution are likely to be lost at a time when such leadership is vital to the achievement of the overall vision underpinning the changes.

It would be shameful to see the high quality research work of Mental Health Nurses, both past, current and future, be lost due to what appears to be an unwillingness to look at the specific needs of leading academic Mental Health Nurses during this period of policy change. A new generation of mental health nurses is participating in and contributing to the research and development of psychiatric services in this country and in this respect we are the envy of colleagues across Europe and in many other countries. It would be a sad indictment were these accomplishments seen to be squandered as an unintended consequence of health research policy reform.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F Playle'.

John F Playle
Chair of Mental Health Nurse Academics UK
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Cc: Ivan Lewis, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Care Services

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3 December 2007

Dear Professor Playle,

Thank you for your letter of 29 October to Dawn Primarolo expressing your concerns about the possible impact of the new NHS research funding mechanisms on mental health nursing research.

As you know, historically, the funding allocated by the Department to NHS Trusts to support research did not reflect the level, quality or relevance of that research. A key component of the Government's new strategy, *Best Research for Best Health*, is to move to a funding system which is transparent, fair and sustainable and where funding reflects Research and Development (R&D) activity. This new research funding system will provide competitively awarded grants to cover the direct costs of research (incurred by both an NHS organisation and its academic partner), as well as paying NHS clinicians to collaborate in research led by others. The Department will also continue to pay the NHS service support costs of research funded by the Department itself and its partners.

The Department's expectation is therefore that the salaries of mental health nursing research teams would be supported through grants obtained competitively from the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) and other research funders. This would seem to be a realistic possibility given the stated quality of the work undertaken by these teams. Research teams in the NHS would also be able to draw upon NIHR Flexibility and Sustainability funding to ensure ongoing support between grants or to support the component of salaries that are not covered by other NIHR sources. Teaching and other non-research activities should be supported via other appropriate funding streams.

Mental health has long been and remains, a priority for NHS R&D and remains one, with the Department being the major funder of mental health research in England. Mental Health Trusts reported spending £4.4million NHS R&D funding on "own account" research in 2005/06 and the Department has already awarded more than £7.4million in 2007/08 to Mental Health Trusts through the new NIHR funding streams. Nevertheless, the Department does recognise that there are concerns about the possible unintended consequences of implementing *Best Research for Best Health*, and has therefore initiated a review of the impact of these funding changes on mental health research in the NHS, the findings of which will be published shortly.

Although this review does raise some issues for further discussion, it concludes that the overall funding picture for mental health research has so far remained stable, with no significant loss of clinical academic posts in mental health research as a result of the implementation of *Best Research for Best Health*. There does, however, appear to be a relative imbalance between NHS and the Higher Education Funding Council for England funding of clinical academic posts in mental health, with the NHS being left historically to fund academic posts for teaching, research and recruitment purposes. Although this is clearly an important issue, which the Department's Director General for Research and Development will raise at a national level with the Higher Education Funding Council for England, this will almost certainly require local resolution.

I hope this reply reassures you of the Department's commitment to ensure that high quality health research continues to take place in the UK.

Yours sincerely,



Katharine Segal
Customer Service Centre
Department of Health
