

Celebrating a century of caring for the vulnerable

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Learning disability nurses may be one of the smallest groups in the profession, but what they lack in size they make up in impact they have on the lives of some of the most vulnerable citizens.

Learning disability nurses make up less than one per cent of the nursing population (NHS Digital) and provide the kind of one-to-one, person-centred support that ensures most people with a learning disability are able to live fulfilling in their communities.

Of course, some people need more intensive support, so we find learning disability nurses working on acute wards, forensic and intensive support services, prisons, courts, the independent and voluntary sector, GP

surgeries, children's services and a host of other settings. They are also proficient in providing positive behavioural support where needed.

Learning disability awareness

This week, as well as marking Learning Disabilities Awareness Week [6] (June 17-23) we will be celebrating the Centenary Year of Learning Disability Nursing with a special event in Parliament. We look forward to welcoming people with learning disabilities, their families, learning disability nurses and others who value the role to this event which is hosted by Health Education England (HEE) in partnership with the British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) and NHS England.

So, yes, we will be doing our part in celebrating the impact learning disability nurses make and the remarkable contributions they have made over the last 100 years.

Tackling the challenges

We should also challenge both learning disability nurses and ourselves about the place they have in our future, since their numbers have steadily been declining, alongside increased demand for their skills in the community. The 50 per cent decrease in applicants for learning disability nursing since 2016 is particularly concerning.

Some solutions are highlighted in new service models that are developing and the NHS Long Term Plan [7]. HEE and our partners across the health and care system need to support them to develop and grow into new ways of working, take advantage of new technologies and ensure each can work to the best of their potential and the full extent of their licence.

I also welcome the proposals put forward in the Interim People Plan [8] to undertake a detailed review of mental health and learning disability nursing to support growth in these areas.

So I hope that as we take time this week to reflect on and celebrate this specialist and treasured group of nurses, we can work together to ensure the profession continues to serve the needs of people and families into the future ? as they have done so well in the past.

Professor Lisa Bayliss-Pratt, Chief Nurse, Health Education England

Further information

What are we doing to address the challenge of recruitment into learning disability nursing?

- Last year we introduced support for Trusts returning learning disability nurses to practice after careers breaks or time away from work.
- We are working with service providers to introduce trainee nursing associates into learning disability services - a proportion of whom may wish to continue with a shortened nursing apprenticeship after their training (the 2 by 2 route).
- Apprenticeship routes will be key to the training of nurses and we are working with employers and HEIs to find an effective means to deliver pre- and post-graduate registration courses.
- We developed a Learning Disability Nurse Leadership Programme [9] to develop leadership skills and increase retention.
- We are enhancing the offer to employers for Trainee Nursing Associates and for nurses returning to practice to include learning disability.
- We are developing an apprenticeship model for Learning Disability Nursing.
- New and planned resources include a Learning Disability Nursing e-book and a Learning Disability Workforce Career Framework.

Find out more about careers in learning disability nursing. [10]

The history of learning disability nursing

The UK's first learning disability nurses were registered as 'mental deficiency nurses' in 1919. This term was used until after the second world war when it was replaced by mental sub-normality nursing and then renamed mental handicap nursing in the 1970s. Learning disability nursing became the accepted term in the 1990s.

(Duncan Mitchell [11] Professor Emeritus, Manchester Metropolitan University).

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[6] <https://www.mencap.org.uk/get-involved/learning-disability-week-2019>

[7] <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/>

[8] <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/publication/interim-nhs-people-plan/>

[9] <https://florence-nightingale-foundation.org.uk/leadership-programme-for-learning-disability-nurses/>

[10] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/nursing/roles-nursing/learning-disability-nurse>

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