Nursing in a secure health setting

The UKCC recently published the results of an exercise to establish how nursing is undertaken in secure settings. Les Storey, chair of the UKCC’s recent review of nursing in secure environments, and Richard Bradshaw review the key points.

The objectives of the study were:
- To describe the nursing competencies required to work in secure environments.
- To establish the extent to which nursing interventions are based on sound research and evidence.
- To review current activity in the development of practice standards in secure environments, with reference to national client groups.
- To identify the effectiveness of the preparation currently offered to nurses working in secure environments.
- To identify issues faced in working with a client group who may compromise therapeutic relationships between patients and nurses, particularly with reference to personality-disordered patients.
- To identify practice issues relevant to the physical health needs of the patient population such as care of women (including care of pregnant prisoners), care of people from different cultural backgrounds.

Parallel work

Since the commissioning of the scoping work, a number of other UK and national policy initiatives have commenced which indicate that this work undertaken by the council is extremely timely. These include, among others:
- Reviews of mental health legislation in England and Wales, and Scotland.
- Continued reporting by the MJabby’s Prisons’ Inspectorate of problems concerning health care delivery in prisons.
- Government policy initiatives on the care and treatment of those with personality disorder.

The purpose of security

In the UK, there are four high-security hospitals, 38 medium secure units and approximately 100 low secure units. In the health sector, secure environments are provided for patients who have mental health problems or learning disabilities. Secure environments are provided at low, medium and high levels specified by the relevant mental health legislation for England and Wales (Mental Health Act 1983), the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 and the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Act 1986. The legislation is largely parallel across the four countries.

There are also 157 prison establishments in the UK and three managing prison services, one each for England and Wales, one covering Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. The level of health care provided varies, but can be generalised as consisting of primary care and outpatient treatment. Most health care is provided during office hours with an on-call service for the remainder.

A prime difference between nurses working in prisons and nurses working in other health settings is that nurses working in prison do not have as much control over the types of patient that they are nursing. In a medical ward in an acute hospital, the nurse knows that a patient will generally present with a medical condition that can be managed by a nurse who has developed the skills, knowledge and understanding of medical nursing. This expertise has been developed through educational programmes and experiences that have been designed to address these conditions.

In prison settings however, a nurse may be presented with patients who have a medical condition, a mental illness or personality disorder. Tomorrow, the patients will be different and the nursing problems they present are different. A

Nursing in secure environments: recommendations

- The UKCC should ensure that the findings of this project are widely disseminated to key stakeholders. Such activity should also include the identification of any areas for future collaboration across the UK.
- The UKCC should take a proactive approach and engage key stakeholders in debate to ensure that they are aware of the importance of professional self-regulation in the maintenance of professional standards and high quality care in secure settings.
- The UKCC should actively encourage and support the development of nursing leadership and clinical supervision within secure environment services.
- The UKCC should ensure that the National Boards, education providers, education consortium/commissioners and other stakeholders are aware of the implications of the findings for education programmes (pre and post registration).
- The UKCC recommends that appropriate induction should always be provided for nurses working in secure care. Induction should be an integral part of a continuing professional development process that includes mentorship and clinical supervision.
- The UKCC should embrace other appropriate agencies to take forward work on developing and improving professional standards (education and practice) in risk assessment, de-escalation and physical restraint of patients within secure environments. Collaborative work also is undertaken to clarify professional practice issues and the maintenance of professional boundaries with clients in secure environments.
- The UKCC should seek input from key stakeholders to identify how good practice can be shared and the possibility of whether a UK-wide resource and dissemination centre might be established. The UKCC should enter into discussions about how research priorities and programmes might be affected by the outcomes of the project.
- The UKCC recommends that the secure services develop secure policies to ensure that where there is an assessed health care need, patients should have access to appropriate healthcare services and that health care professionals should have ready access to patients to meet these identified needs.
- The UKCC recommends that in accordance with best practice in continuing professional development, practitioners continue to develop their knowledge and skills in order to monitor and meet the changing physical, psychological and security needs of patients on the basis of appropriate and comprehensive assessment.
- The UKCC recommends that there is due recognition and an evaluation of current service provision by the secure services of the needs of clients from different minority groups particularly those from ethnic minorities and women, to ensure that their health and other needs are identified and met in secure environments.
- The UKCC recommends that the competency framework tested in this project should be validated by further work, and that the competencies be used to inform the design of nursing and midwifery role frameworks, induction for those roles and continuous professional development.