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 UKCC recently published the results of a scoping exercise to establish precisely how nursing is undertaken in secure environments. The objective of the scoping exercise, undertaken by staff from the faculty of health of the University of Central Lancashire, was to provide a comprehensive overview of the educational, occupational and professional expectations of nurses working in secure health and prison service environments throughout the UK.

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 specific 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.
- Identify the extent to which existing UKCC policies are used to inform practice within secure environments.
- To identify practice issues relevant to the physical health needs of the patient population such as care of women (including care of pregnant women); 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.
- The Future Organisation of Prison Health Care in England, a major review of services for mentally disordered offenders in Scotland.
- Continued reporting by Her Majesty's Prisons' Inspectorates 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 across 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 any other health setting is that nurses working in prison do not have so 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

prison nurse needs to be able to assess, plan, implement and evaluate care for patients who, in other settings, would be nursed by nurses who are on different parts of the UKCC Register.

In her foreword to the report, UKCC president Alison Norman says: 'Secure environments are among the most challenging arenas in which any registered nurse must work.'

She added: 'The UKCC recognises the important role played by nurses in both the physical health care and treatment of people with complex health and psychological needs. Nurses must balance the therapeutic needs of their clients with the security considerations demanded by society.

'In conducting the extensive research upon which this report is based, we have been impressed by the many examples of good practice, where nurses are delivering clear benefits, often under difficult circumstances, to clients in secure environments throughout the UK.'

Recommending improvement
The UKCC have identified 11 recommendations in the report (see Box) and these are now part of an action plan for the council. The UKCC acknowledges that the maintenance and monitoring of professional standards in secure settings relies on a joint approach by practitioners, managers of prison and health services and policy makers in the prison services and NHS and statutory agencies.

Nurses working in the prison services and secure health settings remain accountable to the UKCC for their professional practice. The principles of clinical governance should underpin the development of healthcare provision in secure care, while leadership in all these services is a key method of ensuring that professional standards can be maintained and improved. Employers should support registered nurses to develop the necessary skills and approaches to prioritise, develop, monitor and audit standards.

The UKCC intends to integrate the findings from this report and the issues raised during the dissemination of the findings into its current and future work programmes █

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The report and executive summary are available from UKCC Publications, 23 Portland Place London W1N 4 JT, and is on the UKCC website www.ukcc.org.uk

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 consortia / commissioners and other stakeholders are aware of the implications of the findings on 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 collaborate with 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 explore with 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 security 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 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 all 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 roles, induction for those roles and continuous professional development.**