

Standards in Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing – Do we really need them?

Earlier this year, the Maltese Association of Psychiatric Nurses (MAPN) has published a document which describes the roles and standards of psychiatric mental health nurses (PMHN). This was an important event in the history of psychiatric mental health nursing in Malta, and it was another milestone in the achievements of the work of the association since its formation 10 years ago.

The document presents 10 standards, which sum up the extensive work of the nurse who works with people who suffer from mental health problems and mental illness. It starts off with the most basic essence of PHMning, the therapeutic relationship. It is through the therapeutic use of self, that most psychiatric mental health nursing interventions are delivered. Whether we are observing and monitoring a patient on level 1 supervision, administering medication, preparing a patient for ECT or simply talking to a patient, we are (and should be) using our therapeutic self in engaging with the patient and promoting good mental health. This is what differentiates our discussions with patients from normal day to day chit chat we use in social circumstances. It's not that we don't engage in normal chit chat with patients (after all we are human beings and chit chat is the cornerstone of relationships), but the work of the psychiatric mental health nurse is demonstrated through the use of the therapeutic activities which ultimately validates the profession.

The psychiatric mental health nursing standards follow the traditional nursing process of assessment, planning and outcome identification, implementation of interventions and evaluation. These are tailored to the psychiatric setting, and aspects of these standards are seen in the daily practices of assessment and interviewing on admission, history taking and documentation, monitoring and observation of the patient who is on constant watch or supervision, and the assessment of risk. Care plans are implemented for patients who are placed under the mental health act and nurses have an imperative role in contributing to the planning of care of their patients.

The psychiatric mental health nursing interventions are the core of the work and it includes medication management, education, supporting patients' with their anxieties and working with the patient's significant others. Psychiatric mental health nursing has adopted different approaches when it comes to its interventions, including evidence based practices like psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural approaches and counselling. Medication management remains a central function of the nurse, which includes administration, education, monitoring and encouraging adherence.

Crisis and psychiatric emergencies are potentially serious situations which occur when a patient is in a risk of harm to self or to others. These are delicate situations which require a considerate and professional approach with focus on risk management, de-escalation techniques and ethical and legal considerations. The nurse has to make good use of verbal and non-verbal communication skills and utilise the therapeutic relationship as a tool to address the crisis situation.

The promotion of good mental health and relapse prevention strategies is an essential aspect of the PMH nurse's role. Good mental health is a notion which applies to everyone including the mental health professional. We are not immune and burnout is a common occurrence in the psychiatric mental health nursing profession. Strategies need to be in place to look out for signs of burnout, and seek help when needed. It is then that we can continue promoting good mental health with our patients and the community. Relapse prevention strategies include the promotion of good mental health, education,

identification of signs and symptoms and a plan on how to manage risks, contact services and dealing with emotional distress.

Professional development is essential to the continuous growth of the nurse, the advancement of the profession and improving service delivery. These standards can serve as a guide for professional development and with the continuous emphasis on evidence based practices, it is not only recommendable but is expected that we provide interventions which are based on scientific evidence, research and corroborated practices. The Department of Mental Health has a crucial role in this area and so the recently established Learning Institute for Healthcare Professionals.

Ethical and legal issues remain central to the psychiatric mental health nursing profession. After all, psychiatry is the only branch of medicine which can force its treatment on the patients. This requires nurses to be highly ethical in their work, follow the right legal framework and act as an advocate to protect the patient's rights. An optimum knowledge of the Mental Health Act is fundamental, but more importantly is a humane attitude and a genuine respect for others, no matter what their diagnosis, state of mind or personal circumstances.

Psychiatric mental health nursing is unique in the sense that its practices are embedded in medicine, psychology and sociology but also in a history where people with mental illness were looked after by attendants and guardians. It had its fair deal of controversy, and stigma remains a challenge. We need to be careful that the right practices are adopted, and that the profession continues to develop in the right way. Without standards we can end up running around like headless chickens, being very busy doing a lot of things, but not being very effective (which to me sounds like the right formula for burn out, or worse, for a profession to become irrelevant).

With talks of a new psychiatric hospital flashing in the media, the need for standards in psychiatric mental health nursing is inevitable. It is the practices which define our role, it is the practices which define our identity and having established standards assures that these practices are based on evidence, research and professionalism. Without them, we can easily get lost and challenged on our own roles. With them, we are psychiatric mental health nurses.

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