

Mental Health Act Survey

Preliminary Report
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MALTESE ASSOCIATION OF PSYCHIATRIC NURSES

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The Maltese Association of Psychiatric Nurses (MAPN) conducted an online survey a few days after the launching of the Mental Health Act (10th October 2013).

Research Tool and Objectives:

The research tool (questionnaire) consisted of five questions about the newly launched Mental Health Act. The questionnaire was specifically developed for this study, based on the discourse analysis of opinions expressed by nurses working in the Maltese psychiatric field through several fora and internal communication processes within the MAPN. Face and content validity of the research tool were then tested by a purposely set up panel consisting of experienced psychiatric nurses. Participation entailed in respondents following an internet link sent via e-mail by the MAPN and responding anonymously to the questionnaire via an established survey online forum.

This survey served as an initial information gathering exercise about the implementation of the New Mental Health Act and its implications on the mental health nursing profession. Therefore the main objective of this first descriptive study were to explore the opinion of nurses working in Maltese mental health settings about whether the recently introduced legislation allowed them to give better care to patients and a better service to responsible carers. The study also aimed to explore reasons behind nurses' opinions.

Sample Population and Characteristics:

The sample consisted of nurses who presently work in the field of mental health. Seventy five nurses (n=75) responded to this online survey. More than 2 of every 3 nurses surveyed (n=54) work in either acute in-patient settings or out-patient/community settings, considered as crucial areas for the implementation of the Act. 20% (n=17) worked in long term mental health settings and 15% (n=13) in specialised mental health settings.

Almost 3 in every 4 participants were nurses experienced in the mental health clinical area, with 17% (n=13) of respondents having over 21 years of experience in the field, 27% (n=20) who had 10-14 years of experience and 28 % (n=21) having 5-9 years of experience. These categories of nurses have exceeded the 2 to 3 year average experience

within which nurses are usually expected to have reached the level of ‘competent practitioner’ and would have proceeded to a level of proficiency akin to expert practitioners (Benner, 1982). 28% (n=21) of surveyed participants had between 0-4 years of experience in the Mental Health field.

Preliminary Results:

Information about the MHA-

In response to questions about adequate information in relation to the recently launched Mental Health Act, only 4% of replied that they had adequate information. The vast majority, 80% replied as being poorly informed about the act.

Only 8% of the participants felt that the information given about the new Mental Health Act will improve the care given to patients and/or responsible carers. The remaining 92% responded as either not being sure or did not believe that the information provided will result in some kind of improvement.

Understanding the Implications of the New MHA-

This part addressed the understanding of the implications of the new Mental Health Act on patients, responsible relatives, professionals and institutions. 25% of participants responded as having understood such implications and the remaining 75% outlined uncertainty and lack of understanding of such implications.

The newly launched Mental Health Act will surely affect the way Mental Health services are provided. Only 3% of the respondents replied as considering the present mental health services as being adequately prepared for the introduction of the act. 97% of respondents did not feel that the present Mental Health services are prepared for the implementation of the new Mental Health Act.

Respondents’ Comments:

Participants were given the opportunity to comment on what, if anything, should have been done differently in the preparations for and / or implementation of the new Mental Health Act.

The respondents' main concern seemed to be related to the lack of consultation with nurses, especially those working in the acute settings. . One may point out that ultimately nurses have to put into practice the Mental Health Act and pass relevant information to patients and their responsible carers.

Many respondents pointed out that despite the act being discussed for the past 15 years the Mental Health Services were inadequately prepared on the day of the launching with basic arrangements (e.g. forms) missing. According to the respondents such uncertainty and poor preparation was also reflected on the other members of the multidisciplinary team. The lack of knowledge about the act from the top management was also a recurrent theme.

The non-existent protocols, procedures and vision of mental health services vies-a-vie the Mental Health Act is causing de-motivation, uncertainty and conflict among professionals according to respondents. Many questioned how in a modern society no information (apart from a copy of the act) can be found on the internet. Friendly and non-technical explanation with frequent interdisciplinary information giving meetings and Q&A sessions could have led to setting up a website with a detailed FAQ and also a help line.

Nurses showed strong disappointment about the planning of the few informative lectures about the Mental Health Act and questioned how the authorities expected them to implement such an important shift in mentality by providing a few hours informative lecture which many couldn't attend due to shortage of staff in their respective wards.

The MAPN will follow up with a more detailed analysis of the results of this survey in the coming months and possibly the training needs of nurses in relation to the New Mental Health Act.

Reference:

Benner, P. (1982) From Novice to Expert, *The American Journal of Nursing*, 82 (3) pp. 402-407

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