

A brief history of learning disability nursing in the UK

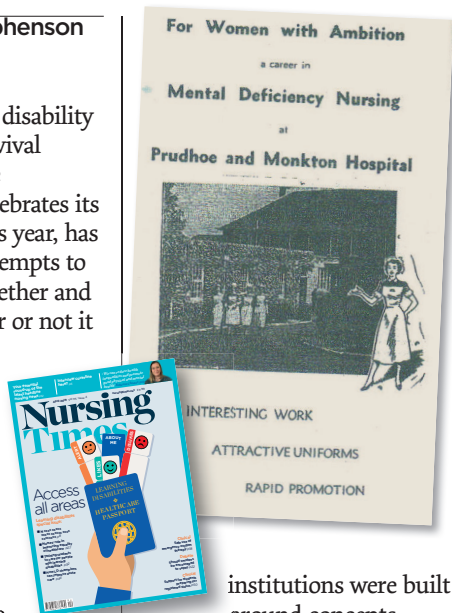
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The story of learning disability nursing is one of survival against the odds. The profession, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, has continued despite attempts to do away with it altogether and a debate over whether or not it is “proper” nursing.

The centenary harks back to the first national certificate for what was then known as “mental deficiency nursing” awarded in 1919 by national psychiatrist body the Medico Psychological Association (MPA), giving official recognition to the role as a distinct nursing branch.

But nursing care for those with learning disabilities existed long before that, taking place in private homes or large institutions that were overseen by psychiatrists. Initially those with nursing qualifications would have been registered as mental health nurses, said learning disability nurse turned academic and historian Professor Duncan Mitchell.

The national certificate came out of a desire to improve standards and to exert control over the growing number of institutions spawned by the Mental Deficiency Act 1913. Early



institutions were built around concepts of education and training, so learning disability nurses had a varied role. Some would have had basic training in bedside nursing but others would have learned teaching skills or how to pass on a trade. “As far as we know there was either little or no classroom training but now and again there would have been a lecture by a psychiatrist and sometimes that involved exhibiting some poor character who lived in the institution who had a particular syndrome,” said Professor Mitchell.

In 1931 the MPA published the first textbook for learning disability nurses – the *Manual for Mental Deficiency Nurses* – known as the “green book”.

All institutions were taken over by the NHS in 1948 and

in the early 1950s nurse training was taken over by the General Nursing Council. Training for learning disability nurses was subsequently brought in line with training for other branches. But the role continued to lack status. “The vast majority of people who went into learning disability nursing either had a relative who worked in the institution or couldn’t get into general nursing,” said Professor Mitchell.

Key developments that had a big impact on the profession included the Mental Health Act 1959, which meant people could only be admitted to institutions voluntarily unless they were a danger. A series of care scandals also shone a spotlight on the sector. “After many years of neglect a lot of investment went into these institutions. Typically big wards of 60 beds were split into around 15-bedded units,” said Professor Mitchell. Then began a slow and gradual period of closure.

The 1972 Briggs report recommended learning disability nursing be replaced by a social care role. But this recommendation was never adopted. The specialty also continued as more people got jobs in community nursing. NHS-employed community “mental handicap” nurses were introduced in the mid 1970s.

The start of a decline in nurse numbers and training

places can be linked to the closure of institutions. Most had education centres, which merged into larger nursing schools and then universities. “The institutions for all their many faults provided a focus and a voice for learning disability nursing,” said Professor Mitchell.

In 2011, a *Panorama* investigation exposed abuse at Winterbourne View in South Gloucestershire, and in 2012, a UK-wide review of learning disability nursing led to the publication of the report *Strengthening the Commitment*, which highlighted the need to boost capacity.

Joanne Delrée, learning disability nurse and interim external engagement lead at London Southbank University, said curriculums had evolved to include “much more” clinical content, shaped by the shocking health inequalities that persist. Roles have also changed with nurses signposting and training other staff. “Support workers do a lot of the day to day domestic stuff now,” she said.

Alongside work to raise the profile of people with learning disabilities, there is increasing recognition of the unique combination of specialist and general skills required to be a learning disability nurse. Ms Delrée said her students were now finding jobs in a much wider range of places with employers “clamouring” to get hold of them. “There really is a shift – people are finally starting to understand the skillset. We don’t just glue pasta onto pieces of paper,” she said.

TIMELINE

1842	Lunacy Act recommends asylums for “pauper” lunatics with no clear distinction between people with mental health problems and learning disabilities
1919	First certificate in “mental deficiency nursing” awarded by the Medico Psychological Association
1948	Institutions and “colonies” for learning disabilities subsumed into the new NHS, becoming “hospitals”
1972	Briggs report suggests support for people with learning disabilities should be outside nursing profession
2001	<i>Valuing People</i> white paper emphasises rights of people with learning disabilities to “lead their lives like any others” and highlights key role of nurses in providing support
2011	Winterbourne View care scandal is exposed by the BBC’s <i>Panorama</i> programme
2019	100th anniversary of learning disability nursing