Using theatre to increase understanding of learning disabilities

Keywords Training/Student nurses/ Communication

In this article...
- The benefits of involving ‘experts by experience’ in health education
- Workshops run by actors with learning disabilities for student nurses
- The students’ feedback about the workshops’ impact on their confidence and skills

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What if I can’t understand or what if it goes wrong?” At Northumbria University, this quote from a second-year student nurse captures a very common concern expressed by our health and social care undergraduates when asked about their communication with people with learning disabilities. This concern may lead to avoidance behaviour in clinical practice and, if left unchallenged, may contribute to the problems faced by people with learning disabilities when accessing healthcare. It is well known that this group’s complex physical and mental health needs are often inadequately met, and the proportion who die in hospital (62%) is higher than that of the general population (46%) (Learning Disabilities Mortality Review, Programme, 2017).

Over the last 25 years, the Department of Health has put in place a range of strategies to address this inequality, commissioning guides such as Signposts for Success (DH, 1998) and white papers such as Valuing People (DH, 2001), designed as approaches for NHS service improvement. However, it was not until the publication of Death by Indifference (Mencap, 2007) and the Independent Inquiry into Access to Healthcare for People with Learning Disabilities report Healthcare for All (Michael, 2008) that we began to see a systematic and multi-organisational approach to the issues that included the higher-education institutions responsible for nurse education. Significantly, out of

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Abstract People with learning disabilities often receive poorer healthcare services than the general population; to improve this, changes need to be made to the undergraduate health education. Northumbria University and Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company have codeveloped a creative health-awareness training (CHAT) project, in which actors with learning disabilities run a workshop for student nurses. In character, the actors portray patients with various needs, first in a theatre piece and then in an interactive session with the students. This is followed by a debrief. Students’ feedback demonstrates that the workshop improves their confidence and skills in supporting people with learning disabilities.

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the 10 recommendations made by Michael (2008), the first states:

“Those with responsibility for the provision and regulation of undergraduate and postgraduate clinical training must ensure that curricula include mandatory training in learning disabilities. It should be competence-based and involve people with learning disabilities and their carers in providing training.”

Professional bodies have highlighted a need for ‘experts by experience’ to be involved in health education. The Royal College of Nursing (2007) argues they can bring a rich range of personal skills, knowledge, experiences and abilities that can contribute to the research arena around health provision and complement researchers’ expertise. The National Advisory Group on the Safety of Patients in England (2013) proposes that patients’ opinions should influence the commissioning and regulation of healthcare services and health professionals’ training.

It is important to recognise that the aim of teaching is not just to enable students to qualify but also to improve their healthcare practice. The Nursing and Midwifery Council’s (2018) professional nursing standards state that educational institutions, together with practice learning partners, must design, deliver and evaluate programmes alongside service users and other stakeholders to support learning and assessment in practice.

Engaging with patients has many benefits for higher-education institutions, such as enhancing learning, challenging assumptions, hearing and valuing service users, and improving services (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability, 2009).

Developing the CHAT project

In response to the inequalities discussed above, learning disability nurse lecturers at Northumbria University and staff and volunteers from the Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company undertook a creative health-awareness training (CHAT) project to increase knowledge and awareness of what patients with learning disabilities need from undergraduate midwifery, physiotherapy and occupational therapy students. The Lawnmowers is a theatre and arts company run by, for and with adults with learning disabilities. Its mission is to support people with learning disabilities to become active citizens, visible artists and agents of change. Over 33 years the Lawnmowers has grown from five members to 100 and runs weekly training in theatre, hip-hop, percussion, Djing and singing. The theatre company dedicated the project to the memory of their friend and colleague Paul King, an Elvis impersonator and actor who had learning disabilities.

“The two-hour workshop develops the students’ confidence to communicate with people with learning disabilities”

The CHAT project was devised by actors from Lawnmowers and contains research from their own lives, ensuring the voice of experts by experience is heard in teaching and learning. The training is delivered through theatre, drama and discussion as part of high-fidelity simulation using the theatrical form known as Theatre of the Oppressed. This approach is based on forum theatre, which began in Brazil. It involves the audience working together to change and improve social or political oppressions depicted in the scene. Students are given pre-session information to read that provides an overview of the challenges faced by a wide range of people with learning disabilities and helps explain the context of the session.

The rationale behind CHAT is to:

- Make theatre and training packages that address systemic, social and political oppression;
- Provide an innovative approach in response to the previously identified drivers;
- Ensure that health and social care staff have the right training to support people with learning disabilities, that perceptions of learning disabilities do not prevent a robust assessment of physical health and that staff can make personalised, reasonable adjustments to care.

In the first half of the session, students watch a 20-minute theatre piece performed by actors. The performance follows the story of a character called Brian King as he attempts to access health services over a period of months. After the performance, critical discussions between actors and the audience challenge the poor practice depicted in the scene and gather key learnings to action during the second half of the session.

In the second half of the session, students work in small groups, rotating around six different workstations. At each one the students meet an actor, in character as a patient from whom they need to gain consent to undertake clinical observations (Fig 1).

The students meet a variety of characters and some are more challenging than others: for example, one might be non-verbal, another may have severe anxiety, another might only want to talk about their favourite TV show, and the next might refuse to have their blood pressure taken. Each character the students meet provides an opportunity to try new and different approaches, adapt their communication and learn about the character’s life and concerns.

After four minutes the actors come out of character and debrief together with the students (Fig 2). They follow a good-judgement model that allows the students to reflect on their own frame of reference and acknowledges that patient safety is paramount. In this model students can pause consultations, peer review, make mistakes and obtain instant feedback (Rudolph et al, 2007). University and theatre company staff oversee and facilitate the debrief in partnership, offering support, encouragement and challenge as required.
Overall, the two-hour workshop develops the students’ confidence to communicate with people with learning disabilities, challenging their perceptions and increasing their knowledge and skills in adapting communication styles. The theatre and fictional scenarios create a safe and challenging space for active learning on both a personal and professional level.

Feedback from students
The Lawnmowers have run the workshop for hundreds of students over five years and feedback was collected using a variety of approaches, including students’ complete formal university session and module evaluation tools. Responses were identified by analysis of this data. Also, within each session, the students were asked to provide poster note feedback about the session at the end, which allowed a quick snapshot of the impact the session has had.

This feedback has identified that common thoughts and fears were around readiness to support people with learning disabilities. Approximately 80% of students described not feeling confident due to a lack of experience, fear of causing offence, or a lack of knowledge about different impairments. The students’ qualitative feedback reflects this and was very positive about the impact of the course on their confidence: “I walked into the lesson scared in case I insulted someone or did something wrong. I left thinking I can challenge myself to do it and work through it” [Student A].

Students also reported feeling less fearful of approaching people with learning disabilities following the session. The Lawnmowers team have observed that at the start of the session there was a sense of apprehension and fear among the students. However, after the initial contact during the simulation sessions, the students visibly relaxed and demonstrated during the simulation sessions, the students. However, after the initial contact during the simulation sessions, the students visibly relaxed and demonstrated.

Communication skills were also consistently highlighted as a key area of learning. Students often reflected on how theirs had been tested by the workshop: “This is a session that I didn’t know I needed! I think this has really helped me and given me confidence when caring for a patient with a learning disability. This was a very valuable session and I really do think that I have learnt good communication skills that I will apply in my everyday life and in my career. Thank you” [Student C].

“I gained more experience on how to communicate with learning disability patients. [I] learnt to be patient, non-judgemental and delve deeper. This session will make a difference to how I see learning disability patients” [Student F].

In reflecting on the workshop, the team from the university and the Lawnmowers observed that some very rich learning occurs during periods of the workshop that they did not expect. In the period of discussion between students and actors, which follows the simulated activity, we have observed effortless and, at times, inspiring conversations on a social level. This has led us to consider whether the workshop’s learning objectives are being partially met by simply providing the opportunity for the two groups to converse.

Conclusion and future plans
Northumbria University’s faculty of health and life sciences has a commitment to develop and maintain a strategy that values and involves at all levels of its teaching, learning, business engagement and research activities. Involvement of the public, patients, service users and carers has been high on the political agenda for the past 25 years. Underlying this is the belief that including those with direct experience brings a vital perspective to complex decision making in policy development, service planning and delivery. This agenda encourages academics in nursing to develop methods of involving experts by experience in all aspects of education, including recruitment, curriculum design and delivery, and student appraisal. The CHAT project provides a first step towards this. The increased authentic involvement of the Lawnmowers actors creates a knowledge democracy, which intends to hold all views equal rather than favouring more traditionally powerful positions (Cook et al, 2019). The CHAT project values the often-overlooked views of experts by experience. We now plan to investigate the impact of the Lawnmowers’ work with nurses in practice, to ascertain how they retain, use and develop on this learning in the workplace. NT

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