An overview of an oral history project featuring Learning Disability Nurses and their stories, which coincides with the centenary of the first course Learning Disability nursing courses.


This unique project has sought to contribute to an area of nursing research where there is limited knowledge and understanding. It has employed the oral history method to capture the personal accounts of intellectual disability nurses with over 30 years’ experience in this field of practice in England the Republic of Ireland. It has analysed these accounts to try and understand the motivations of these staff as to why they chose to spend so much of their employed working life working with people with learning disabilities, and to learn lessons that might resonate with the current crises in nursing of recruitment, and retention in nursing specialities, specifically in the Republic of Ireland and England.

It has preserved these stories in a series of digitally recorded oral histories that have captured their careers creating a unique collection held by the Royal College of Nursing’s archive in order for nursing, social science, or history scholars of the future to have access to data that ordinarily would have been at risk of being lost forever, unless it were collected and archived. Because of the closure of Learning Disability hospitals in both jurisdictions, and the accompanying move away from congregated living, few, if any, of the remaining practising learning disability nurses will have experience or knowledge that is located in the old ‘long stay’ institutions. It was therefore timely to undertake this project to give voice to these ‘untold stories’ of these nurses who have worked for many years supporting people with learning disabilities. This study aimed to;

- Explore the lived experience of nurses and health care assistants in both the UK and Ireland of their working lives,
- examine factors affecting the sustainability of the workforce and relate this to contemporary issues of recruitment and retention,
- unearth lessons for contemporary providers of health and social care of services and make appropriate recommendations regarding workforce sustainability and,
- add to the RCN, UK archive of intellectual disability nurses’ and health care assistants’ oral histories.

The collection of interviews, 20 English and 10 Irish nurses, offered the team the a unique opportunity to interpret, and analyse these data to establish themes and categories that give us authentic insights into their motivations, drives and the changing contexts of learning disability nursing over the last three decades. In both jurisdictions we have found common and different issues by nurses in this study. The strongest was a ‘Sense of justice - doing the right thing and making a difference’. Many of these nurses reported a ‘very early interest in working with people with learning disabilities’. Similarly commonly reported was a sense of ‘Enjoyment and satisfaction and passion’. Although, these learning disability nurses reported that they would repeat their careers again, many experienced stress on a scale which could be considered extreme and harmful, with some saying they became burnt out and felt unable to ‘can’t cope ‘ and ‘isolation’. There were many accounts of personal, professional and

---

1 Learning Disability is referred to as Intellectual Disability in the Republic of Ireland.
social coping mechanisms which were linked to the theme of internal and external support. And these mechanisms, ‘Personal Resilience and digging deep’ and ‘Fighting the system -now and then’ were expressed proudly, reflecting a shared ability to stay in the profession despite the many challenges and ‘changing contexts’. These contexts have required these nurses to respond to the needs and challenges of a changing service landscape by adapting and taking up new opportunities. Many of the women in this study began their nursing careers without the educational qualifications required to become registered nurses, but have nonetheless taken up educational opportunities ‘Self/professional development and learning’ to convert either from enrolled to registered, specialised diploma courses and, or studied for higher qualifications such as master’s level and above. Across both genders there was a sense that education and professional development was the key to fulfilling a shared vision to develop new skills and knowledge. For some of the men, they reported that career promotion was quite rapid on becoming qualified, and they recalled many opportunities to achieve senior positions in learning disability services. It appears that some promotions were linked to gender, and perhaps also to physical attributes, as some men were targeted for working with clients described as ‘challenging’ clients because of their physical size particularly in the early days of institutional care ‘Early promotions’ and ‘knowing the right people’. Although the learning disability workforce seems to have a strong shared sense of vision this appeared not to be shared this with other professions or the wider family of nursing; sadly almost universally these nurses felt ‘Undervalued as a professional’.

Dr. Su McAnelly, Northumbria University, Dr. Colin Griffiths, Paul Keenan, Dr. Sandra Fleming, Dr. Carmel Doyle, and Michelle Cleary, Trinity College Dublin, Dr. Helen Atherton, Leeds University Professor Bob Gates, Dr. Paul Sutton, The University of West London.

For more information about the ‘Untold stories: The Learning Disability Nursing Oral History Project’ for England please contact Professor Bob Gates Bob.Gates@uwl.ac.uk or Dr Su McAnelly su.mcanelly@northumbria.ac.uk, and for the Republic of Ireland contact Dr Sandra Fleming flemins@tcd.ie