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The times are changing in mental health nursing

It is an interesting time for mental health nursing. Major changes have been suggested by the Willis and Francis reports and then the government's response to this, in the Shape of Caring review, has heralded a generic first two years in training. The new career route of apprentice and assistant nurses offers a different way of learning the knowledge and skill to be a nurse practitioner. From next year student nurses will be financing their own education and training instead of receiving financial support from a bursary.

From my perspective in higher education these are worrying times. I do not disagree that mental health nurses need more physical health training, and likewise adult nurses need more mental health training. Introducing apprentices and assistant practitioners is one way of addressing the resource gap in nursing and healthcare, and potentially may appeal to people who do not suit the present academic route. Likewise I realise that government wants to tighten the purse strings so student self-funding via loans may be one answer. However, I am concerned about the recruitment and retention of mental health nurses.

This is a brilliant career and one which young people seem to be turning to increasingly, perhaps because it is better than a degree that does not lead to a career pathway. Recruiting young people is good news and at least goes a little way of addressing the age gap, as many of us are near retirement group. However, I am worried that the proposed changes will act as a deterrent.

At the moment we screen from the start with the degree course to make sure the candidate has the right motivation, attitude, and emotional resilience to be a mental health nurse. If students are recruited to a generic course, the programme will be adult nurse dominated and the chances of them choosing to be a mental health nurse may diminish, and we could end up with the acute shortages that the US, Australia and New Zealand have seen for a long time.

As for the apprenticeship and associate nurse, some of us can remember that the state enrolled nurse allowed people with a less academic background to provide an excellent service, but I am also concerned about nursing and healthcare being dumbed down – is this a backdoor way of demeaning our status as we have been 'too posh to wash'? It has been claimed that if universities can recruit more nursing students then this will increase the numbers coming through into practice. My concern is for the mature candidates – many of these have commitments, and if the bursary is cut they may be lost.

Times are a-changing, and I would like to commend you all for work you do in increasingly difficult circumstances, in a service wanting more with less resources. We know there will always be people with mental distress. I hope there will always be mental health nurses who lead the way in helping the service user to cope and recover. **MHN**

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Unite/MHNA update

A round-up of activity by professional officer Dave Munday

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