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# Where are the mental health nurses?

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# Where are the mental health nurses?

## **Abstract**

In the 2007 national census, 7.1 million Australians answered yes to having a mental illness in their lifetime (ABS, 2013). This is a significant number of people, all of whom deserve specialist care from appropriately trained and qualified nurses.

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## **Where are the mental health nurses?**

**Authors - Anita Cregan, Dana Perlman, Lorna Moxham**

In the 2007 national census, 7.1 million Australians answered yes to having a mental illness in their lifetime (ABS 2013). This is a significant number of people, all of whom deserve specialist care from appropriately trained and qualified nurses. Just as a woman who is having a baby deserves care and treatment from a trained midwife, or a child has the right to be cared for by a nurse trained in paediatrics', so too, a person with a mental illness also deserves a nurse who is qualified and trained in mental health. But where are these nurses?

Despite 1:5 people having a mental health condition, of the 296,028 employed nurses in 2013, only 19, 226 worked primarily in mental health. This equates to only 7% (AIHW 2015).

The term mental illness can create fear and misunderstanding in individuals who are not familiar with mental illness or who have not been educated on the many types of mental illness (CMHA 2015). This confusion, concern or fear can lead to avoidance and when this comes from healthcare staff consumers can be left feeling isolated, challenged and unsupported; often leading to a negative therapeutic interaction (CMHA 2015).

These aforementioned challenges could be a reason why there is a shortage in the number of nurses working in the area of mental health. Given then, that BN students are the future workforce it is important that we understand where they want to work and perhaps of even more interest is gaining an understanding of why they make the choices that they do.

In Australia it is compulsory that all nursing students participate in clinical placements as part of their educational requirements. The national health and hospitals reform commission (NHHRC) identified that clinical placements can be inconsistent from one placement to the next and acknowledges that without the proper supervision and support the student can be left to feel overwhelmed, undervalued and disinterested in that area of health (NHHRC 2008). It is now well known that clinical placements shape the way that students' progress into their selected discipline areas as registered nurses (Boyd-Turner et al 2016).

This honours project is investigating the effects of clinical placement on BN students choice of discipline area as an RN. The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in self-determination theory. Self-determination theory is a theoretical framework that has been applied within a variety of professional development settings to gain insight into human behaviour. In particular, self-determination theory has been applied in settings that assist in gaining insight into how experiences such as clinical placement can influence the desire and motivation toward future career intentions.

A quantitative, quasi-experimental design is being used to frame this honours project. Data is being collected using a pre-test and post-test design with two surveys administered to BN students. The

four pillars of SDT are examined. These are Autonomy, competency, relatedness and motivation. Survey analysis will identify each participants support for key psychological needs and individual motivation towards working with people living with a mental illness. This will enable the research team to have an understanding of who wants to work in mental health and why. With such an understanding we might be able to increase the future mental health nursing workforce – let’s hope so!

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