Transgender training and knowledge left to chance

An RCN survey has revealed that nurses need more understanding about how to support the growing number of transgender patients. Just 13% of nurses feel prepared to meet the needs of their transgender patients, according to a survey by the RCN. The UK-wide research involving more than 1,200 nursing staff found this could be due to lack of training, despite more than three quarters encountering transgender patients in their work, and 56% caring for them directly.

Nearly four out of five nurses reported having no training at all in this area, and only 1% said they covered the subject during pre-registration training. Referrals to gender identity clinics have risen significantly over the past decade, and the RCN is calling on the government to ensure the care of transgender patients is introduced at all levels of nursing and across healthcare education.

The RCN recently released its ‘Fair care for trans patients’ guidance, prompted by an RCN congress resolution put forward by staff nurse Rachael Ridley, who has herself undergone gender reassignment.

Ms Ridley, who works in Cumbria, says rural locations can be particularly isolating for transgender patients, with less access to support services. She would like to see more nurses specialising in transgender issues in rural localities.

‘Gender identity clinics can be difficult to access,’ she says. ‘I know someone who worked for the NHS

was a need for colleges and universities to do something about it despite the funding pressures they are under.’

The guidance for nurses and healthcare assistants urges respectful treatment of trans patients at all times. If unsure about a person’s gender identity, or if clarity is needed on how a patient would like to be addressed, then nurses should ask politely and discreetly.

They should also avoid disclosing a patient’s trans status to anyone who does not need to know.

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Petra Kendall-Raynor
freelance health journalist

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and couldn’t get a pension recently because they did not have a gender identity certificate.

‘They needed to be referred to a clinic for an assessment and for all the paperwork to be signed, but the waiting list was months. They were relying on their pension for income and were distressed to the point of considering suicide.’

**Showing respect**

East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust equality and diversity lead Anne Wells, who contributed to the RCN guidance, says: ‘This is not about nurses doing something different, it’s about them understanding. It’s about treating everyone with respect and asking them what they would like to be called.

‘Rarely is the subject mentioned during training and I have witnessed some appalling behaviour towards trans patients. It has to be taught in universities, not left to chance.’

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found that transgender people experience severe problems with accessing appropriate healthcare in a timely way.

Welcoming the RCN research, an EHRC spokesperson said: ‘We hope that steps are taken quickly to address concerns, including improving the evidence base in order to better understand the experience of transgender patients. Training for healthcare professionals should be made a priority.’

Earlier this year, the House of Commons women and equalities committee published its Transgender Equality report, which found that the health service is ‘failing to ensure zero tolerance of transphobic behaviour’.

NHS England responded to the report, stating that it had increased funding and conducted a review of gender identity services to decrease waiting times.

It said it had also brought together a range of national bodies and patient groups to address many of the problems trans people face in accessing general health services.

Royal Glamorgan Hospital clinical nurse specialist in sexual health and HIV Stewart Attridge says:

‘It is important for nurses to remember that there can be two different aspects of gender that need to be taken into consideration: physical and psychological.

‘I know of some patients who have tried self-medicating with hormones bought on the internet due to the frustration they feel with the health service and delays in the system.

‘Mandatory training should cover these topics. It may go into great detail about using the correct recycling facilities but won’t mention the importance of addressing patients by the correct pronoun.’

To read the RCN guidance

*Fair Care for Trans People, go to tinyurl.com/trans-people-RCN*

**`We have seen a cultural shift and greater acceptance of transgender people`**

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust’s Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) is the only such NHS-funded service in the UK for children and young people, and their families, who experience difficulties in the development of their gender identity.

A total of 1,419 people were referred to the clinic in 2015-16, compared with just 97 in 2009-10.

A trust spokesperson says some of these patients feel uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth, while others are unhappy with the gender role that society expects. Some may go on to identify as transgender or gender variant, while others see themselves as people who are simply different.

The GIDS works closely with University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, where patients can be referred for treatment and supported by specialist nurses.

GIDS director and consultant clinical psychologist Polly Carmichael says: ‘The work we do here is highly specialised. It’s our role to provide a safe, therapeutic space where people can speak to a range of professionals about their circumstances. We do this without judgement.

‘We are working hard to recruit more staff to meet demand and ensure we are able to see young people within reasonable timescales.

‘We’re seeing an unprecedented rise in referrals to the service. ‘We can’t identify a single reason for the increase, but we have certainly seen a cultural shift, and thankfully more acceptance in terms of how we think about gender and greater recognition of transgender and gender variant people.’