‘Staff want to address cultural issues, but don’t know how’

A new e-learning tool aims to help nurses and midwives reduce health inequalities and provide truly individualised care to diverse patient groups

By Elaine Cole @PrideInNursing

Katie de Freitas believes a greater awareness of cultures is crucial if clinicians are to meet the needs of patients and families. ‘Cultural competency is a matter of quality and safety,’ says the quality improvement lead at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust (GOSH). ‘It can help to bridge the gap between those providing care and those accessing services.

‘As healthcare professionals, we need to be able to communicate effectively with our patients. We need to be responsive to individual needs – understanding what particular care or treatments may be accepted, how individuals perceive their own health and well-being and how we can enable them to feel comfortable and safe.’

Ms de Freitas’ e-learning tool to support cultural competence originated from work she did for a Mary Seacole development award project. The tool has now received funding from Health Education England, as well as backing by England’s chief nursing officer Jane Cummings and Royal College of Midwives general secretary Cathy Warwick. Available on the HEE e-Learning for Healthcare website, it is free to NHS healthcare professionals.

Ms Cummings says: ‘Everyone accessing NHS services has a right to receive unbiased, non-judgmental care that supports their individual needs, values and beliefs. We all need to be culturally competent in the NHS, so that the care we provide is not only safe but of the best quality.’

**Tailored approach**

The e-learning tool consists of three modules. These 20-30 minute learning sessions include written content, animation, activities and opportunities for reflection. Their purpose is to support clinicians to gain knowledge and understanding of the issues around culture and health, and how this might influence outcomes.

The first two modules apply to all healthcare professionals, with the third aimed specifically at midwives. Where specialties need a tailored approach, they can build on the first two modules.

Ms de Freitas won the Mary Seacole development award in 2014, and part of her project was to look at cultural competence in the maternity setting. She moved from a post in Bethnal Green, London, to take up a role as clinical projects midwife at Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust.

‘It was very different in terms
Ms de Freitas ensured service users were involved in creating the tool to gain perspective on the needs of pregnant women. Cultural diversity is now discussed in most aspects of training and the human factors of patient care are given priority. Women see a much stronger relationship with their named midwives as a result.

Crucially, Ms de Freitas ensured that service users were directly involved in development of the tool. ‘Most of the midwives had trained and lived in the area, with many of them born relatively locally. They wanted to ask potentially sensitive questions around cultural issues but didn’t know how to approach it. They wanted to give great care.’

The trust’s head of midwifery, Deborah McAllion, says in 2012-13 the staff faced a spate of challenging clinical and social issues. ‘We experienced a change in demographics for our pregnant population that resulted in shifts in ethnic diversity,’ she says. ‘Midwives wanted to try to understand the difficult situations faced by women and provide support.’ She adds that most midwives will have had some limited training in cultural and social aspects of childbirth, but not enough to help with the range of situations that might arise. ‘By understanding the community, they are able to gain perspective on the needs of pregnant women. Cultural diversity is now discussed in most aspects of training and the human factors of patient care are given priority. Women see a much stronger relationship with their named midwives as a result.’

Without stress or fear

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One such service user, Fionah Kurangwa, agreed to take part in the work to repay the ‘absolutely fantastic’ care she received from her midwife.

‘The project was dealing with the maternity experiences of African-Caribbean women and I thought this was a brilliant opportunity to air my views as one,’ she says. ‘How often do you get asked to put your views across?’

She adds that, given the challenges nurses and midwives face on a daily basis, trying to work out patients’ social and cultural needs might sometimes feel like an additional pressure.

‘This tool can help staff address those needs without stress and fear of being judged,’ says Ms Kurangwa. ‘I hope the tool answers some of their concerns and questions.’

Access to care
Ms Kurangwa believes the training will improve patient care. ‘Pregnancy and the time immediately following childbirth are some of the most stressful periods in a woman’s life. Having a nurse or midwife who understands your social or cultural issues would go a long way towards minimising that stress.’

Ms de Freitas says understanding other cultures is also important in terms of improving access – those who have poor experiences of care might be reluctant to have contact with health services in the future. ‘The tool aims to make healthcare professionals able to communicate with and care for each individual.

‘It helps them to encourage discussion of cultural and religious beliefs and how this may influence the health behaviours of their patients.

‘It is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but one in which you attempt to work within the individual, family, cultural and religious context of an person’s life.

Listen and learn
‘Becoming culturally competent is not about having all the answers or becoming an expert on all cultural and religious beliefs – it’s about being able to ask questions, listen and be able to respond appropriately, and continually learning and reflecting on your practice.’

Her chief nurse at GOSH, Juliette Greenwood, points out that cultural competency has been shown to contribute to reducing healthcare disparities. ‘This leads to improved patient care outcomes. This new resource will better support clinicians in achieving that.’

Access the Cultural Competence tool at tinyurl.com/cultural-tool