Mental health strategy must include nursing

The profession is strangely absent from the World Health Organization’s $60 million, five-year initiative

A five-year mental health initiative launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) seeks to ensure access to high-quality, affordable mental healthcare for an additional 100 million people in 12 as yet unnamed countries.

This is a laudable aim that is supported by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) – high-quality mental healthcare is one of our priorities.

The WHO admits that ‘mental healthcare has had many advocates but there has been limited commitment and funding for sustained implementation and scale-up of services’.

Governments must decide how they spend their health budgets, but the WHO guidance should have an impact on the future funding of mental health services, and that can only be a good thing.

Focus on mental health nursing

However, the four-page document that describes the WHO’s $60 million (around £46 million) initiative does not mention nurses or nursing, and that is a missed opportunity. Having a chief nursing officer at the WHO since 2017 has helped massively in raising the profile, status and recognition of nurses, but clearly there is still some way to go in the field of mental health.

One area where the WHO could fruitfully spend some of that $60 million is on nurses.

Some countries, the UK included, have specialist registered mental health nurses who have unique skills that can make a world of difference to people in desperate need of support and treatment.

But all registered nurses should be educated and equipped to provide holistic care for patients, whatever their problems.

Challenging stigma and discrimination

Nurses can intervene to prevent problems developing when patients are exhibiting early signs of mental distress. And they can also be there at the patient’s side in the long term.

The stigma and discrimination that people with mental health problems face are difficult to bear, but nurses can help to change societal norms and values, and nursing care can help people maintain their dignity in the face of what can feel like societal indifference.

Of course, the kind of support needed for chronic, debilitating mental health conditions cannot be achieved in a one-off, ten-minute intervention: it is time-consuming and demanding, and can put pressure on the workforce over the long term.

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Around the world there are shortages of nurses in all areas of nursing, and that is especially true in mental healthcare.

In physical healthcare we have strong evidence about how increasing the number of registered nurses on wards improves outcomes for patients. In mental health nursing we do not have the same level of evidence, but we know from the NHS Confederation in the UK, and anecdotally, that shortages of mental health nurses lead to services being put under increased strain.

The ICN is working closely with the WHO on a number of issues relating to mental healthcare, and we are pleased to have recently given special affiliate status to the International Nurses Society on Addictions.

Addressing the knowledge deficit

When people talk about mental healthcare they often speak of medical and social care, but they fail to mention nursing care. If expert mental health nursing is missing from the narrative it can become invisible, and that makes securing increased investment in the profession and improved education so much more difficult.

Clearly there is a job to be done to increase global leaders’ understanding of the critical contribution nurses bring to improving mental healthcare, and the ICN is committed to working with the WHO to correct that knowledge deficit.