Learning disability health inequalities are a ‘national shame’

People with learning disabilities and autism die decades earlier than the general population. We know this from successive LeDeR reports. For people with autism and a learning disability the difference can be approaching 30 years, according to the latest LeDeR report published in November 2023, which is based on data for 2022. Of the 2,054 deaths in people with a learning disability, 853 (42%) were avoidable. The report goes on to make the point that good care can prevent deaths.

There is also much evidence, including the RCN’s Impact of Staffing Levels on Safe and Effective Patient Care, that employing the right number of qualified and experienced nurses significantly improves patient outcomes. This evidence applies to learning disability nurses as much as to any other field of practice. Your unique training, experience and skills means that you are best placed to understand individuals’ and families’ needs in this specialty.

Why then do nearly one in three NHS trusts in England not have a learning disability liaison service employing a registered learning disability nurse?

Our investigation, Exclusive: ‘shocking’ hospital learning disability nurse gaps (page 6), shows that of the 110 NHS trusts who responded to our Freedom of Investigation request (made to 136 trusts), 15 said they did not have any kind of a learning disability liaison service. A further 17 described having a ‘safeguarding team’ that provides support to patients, but with no access to a learning disability nurse at all.

Our report shows that the learning disability liaison nurse post is under-recognised by NHS trusts, which might be one reason why some do not fund it. Sometimes teams are made up of people from other specialties.

People with learning disabilities deserve better and let’s hope the new UK government gets to grips with this gross health inequality and national shame.

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Our mission

Learning Disability Practice aims to inspire professional excellence by informing, supporting and educating nurses throughout their careers. RCNi is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Royal College of Nursing. The RCN protects RCNi’s editorial independence, and perspectives and opinions published in our journals and our online services should not be taken to represent those of the RCN, unless specifically stated. Should you wish to comment on or otherwise respond to editorial content, please contact the editor.