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Hot Topic

Simpson, A. (2008) Hot Topic: Working in partnership with families must form part of mental health nurse training. *Nursing Times*, 104(39),16.

Around six million carers in the UK provide regular and substantial support to a friend, partner or relative with a mental health problem or both mental and physical illness. Up to two million of these are children providing care in their family home. Many of these people put their lives on standby, missing out on career opportunities, personal relationships and incurring extra costs as a direct result.

If these individuals didn't sacrifice their time and energies to support their loved ones, the burden would fall on the NHS. The economic value of the contribution made by all carers in the UK has been calculated at £87 billion each year. Yet they frequently fail to receive the support they need from mental health nurses.

The government recognises their value and has introduced an extensive range of legislation, policies and guidelines. This makes it clear there is a statutory requirement and expectation that mental health staff should consider and address the needs of carers as an integral part of service delivery across all settings.

Despite all these facts, carers frequently feel emotionally unsupported by nurses and frustrated by a lack of information and inadequate involvement in the planning of care. This is extremely worrying. Studies show that relatives and friends closely involved in supporting a patient can suffer prolonged psychological distress, but also that comprehensive support can mitigate any resulting mental and physical health problems. Nurses are in the best position to provide this support.

I would argue the reasons nurses fail to support carers can be attributed to three main factors. Firstly, mental health nursing is a busy profession and nurses are over-run working with patients. Secondly, nurses do not always fully appreciate the magnitude of the burden placed on family and friends and so may not see the importance of their support. And thirdly, they are not necessarily in a position or enabled to give the support that is so desperately needed.

Caring for a loved one is wildly different from caring for a patient. Nurses don't necessarily know how to support carers instinctively. I'm not suggesting nurses don't invest themselves emotionally, but next time you look at one of your patients who doesn't recognise you or has forgotten how to feed themselves, imagine that's your mum, or your child. Then you'll be part way to understanding how it feels to be a carer.

But recognising their needs is just the start. Nurses then need to feel confident and competent in knowing how best to work with key relatives or close friends, provide advice and information and access additional support when necessary. To facilitate this, I suggest there is a need for a wide ranging and comprehensive education and training programme that will enable mental health nurses to inform, involve and support carers.

Researchers at City University London were recently commissioned by the Supporting Carers Better Network (a project of the national charity Together: Working for Wellbeing) to identify the

content and design of an education and training programme that would help mental health staff better address the needs of this vulnerable group.

We conducted focus groups and listened to the experiences and views of carers, support workers nurses, service users and managers.

We found that the importance of working in partnership with families should be an integral part of training to become a mental health nurse, provided to all mental health students and trainees throughout their pre-registration professional education. This education should be supplemented with visits to and placements with families, carer support workers, centres and organisations.

If this level of education can be incorporated at this stage, nurses will be able to develop a better understanding of the needs of this vulnerable group. They would see supporting carers as one of the responsibilities of being a mental health nurse.

Continuing professional development and post-registration training should then be exploited to ensure that the existing mental health workforce is able and motivated to provide mental health services that are family-friendly and sensitive to the needs of families and carers. Smaller numbers of nurses could then be trained to provide more intensive family work and specialist interventions.

To be successful, this must be supported by a comprehensive, organisational strategy that includes explicit support throughout all levels of health and social care.

Most importantly, this strategy needs the support of current nurses. Nurses must see supporting carers as their responsibility. Then, with the help of a well designed education and training package, they will be able to understand the burden placed on partners, families or friends, identify the signs of distress and offer appropriate support.

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