Mental Health Nursing Education

Position Statement

The Australian College of Mental Health Nursing (ACMHN) promotes best practice in mental health through quality education in nursing and midwifery.

It is the position of the ACMHN that:

- Registered and Enrolled nurses require specialist educational preparation and qualifications for mental health practice.
- Mental health nursing content must be taught by nurses with specialist qualifications and expertise in mental health nursing and preferably be credentialed.
- Nurses and midwives should undertake education (formal and informal) to equip themselves to support consumers to maintain good mental health, and to identify, manage and care for people with mental health issues commensurate with their scope of practice. Other unregulated health care workers (such as assistants in nursing) should also undertake mental health education (formal and informal) commensurate with their role.
- Consumers, carers and clinicians should be actively involved in the design, delivery, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum.
- Education about mental health needs to be contemporary, evidence-based, ethical, culturally safe and responsive to consumer needs.
- Mental health nursing is a distinct and defined area of nursing practice which requires an application of specialty focussed knowledge and skill sets. Formal education programs are essential to developing expertise as a specialist mental health nurse. In accordance with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) specialist knowledge and skill is acquired at level 8 or above for Registered Nurses, and AQF level 6 for Enrolled Nurses.
- Newly graduated Registered Nurses and midwives should be prepared for beginning mental health practice. To ensure this, the benchmarks for mental health content in
pre-registration nursing curricula established by the Mental Health Nurse Education Taskforce should be incorporated into the accreditation of those courses by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC).

- Registered Nurses working in specialist mental health nursing roles including clinical practice, education and management should have a post-graduate qualification in mental health nursing, and working towards a Mental Health Nurse Credential with the ACMHN.

- Enrolled Nurses with specialist mental health roles should undertake formal education in mental health relevant to their practice.

- To ensure the quality and relevance of formal education programs, the program should be informed by contemporary education theory and practice. Learning content and processes require interactive, research-informed teaching, and learning rigour.

- In 2015, the ACMHN developed an accreditation process for mental health nursing post-graduate education programs to set a benchmark for quality and consistency nationally.
Background Paper

Purpose:
The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses (ACMHN) strives to enhance the mental health of communities through the efforts and contribution of the profession of nursing. This position statement on mental health nursing education provides guidance to education providers, nurses, employers and stakeholders on the educational preparation necessary to ensure nurses and midwives provide high quality mental health care to consumers.

Education preparation in mental health at undergraduate level

In Australia, there have been longstanding concerns about the preparedness of newly registered nurses in the area of mental health (Happell & Gaskin 2013; Stevens et al. 2013; Mental Health Nurse Education Taskforce 2008). The Mental Health Nurse Education Taskforce (MHNET) framework for mental health content within undergraduate nursing curricula was promoted to education providers, and support offered to implement the framework. While some improvements have been achieved, the framework has not been fully adopted by most universities. MHNET also recommended that accreditation authorities should incorporate the benchmarks for mental health content in pre-registration nursing into their course accreditation guidelines, but this recommendation has not been adopted by Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC).

Education for specialist mental health nurses

Nurses working in specialist mental health roles require appropriate education preparation. The Mental Health in Pre-Registration Nursing Courses report identified the development of mental health nursing practice begins at undergraduate level, but requires a clear articulation pathway through postgraduate level preparation for more advanced and specialist practice. There is evidence that undertaking postgraduate education benefits nurses’ professional development (Cotterill-Walker 2012). At the same time, research has indicated that nurses face barriers to undertaking further education (Hickman et al. 2014).
Enrolled Nurses specialising in mental health

Enrolled nurses are an important part of the health workforce and have the potential to be more visible and active in all areas of the mental health industry. Over the past ten years, Enrolled Nursing has undergone several important changes, including the extension of tasks and the expansion in the scope of practice. The availability of further education relevant to Enrolled Nurses seeking to specialise their practice is limited. The main formal education option available is an Advanced Diploma of Nursing (Enrolled Nursing: HLT61107) with a mental health focus, however there are very few organisations that offer this qualification.

Quality and relevance of education

Mental health nursing education must meet the needs of contemporary mental health practice in a changing mental health landscape. Challenges include a transition from illness to wellness care, greater emphasis on primary and community health settings, and meeting the unique needs of vulnerable populations.

Mental health nurses require a wide range of knowledge and skills to practice in this changing environment, including understanding of recovery-oriented practice; primary mental health; interventions for mental health challenges; mind-body interplay; co-associated conditions; adaptation; rehabilitation options; brief interventions; trauma-informed care; specialised services for vulnerable populations; and nurse-led interventions.

The Scan of Postgraduate Mental Health Nursing Programs in Australia 2011 (ACMHN) found "there was considerable variation in relation to expectations about specialist and advance nursing practice. Both graduate certificate and graduate diploma programs were often described as preparing nurses for roles such as: beginning practitioners in mental health: advances practitioners in mental health; speciality practitioners at an introductory level; or proficient practitioners". In 2015, the ACMHN developed a National Framework for Postgraduate Education for Mental Health Nurses in Australia to ensure national consistency in the educational preparation of mental health nurses. Accreditation of post-graduate courses for mental health nurses will complement the ACMHN’s existing Credential for Practice Program.
Conclusion

The mission of the ACMHN is to set the standard for mental health nursing practice, and therefore commands quality in educational practices. Registered and Enrolled Nurses specialising in the area of mental health require additional education preparation for these roles. Educational programs must be contemporary, evidence based, ethical, culturally safe and responsive to consumer needs, and relevant to the practice of mental health nursing.
References

Australian Qualifications Framework http://www.aqf.edu.au


