

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a senior mental health nurse working in a regional mental health service in rural Victoria. I have an undergraduate degree in Nursing and postgraduate qualifications in mental health nursing and infant & perinatal mental health. I have worked in a number of diverse and challenging clinical, educational and leadership roles and an important part of my current role is to oversee our undergraduate nurse student placements and our graduate mental health nurse program. When completing my own undergraduate studies there were mental health theoretical requirements across two semesters as well as at least a four week mental health clinical placement. In my third year mental health nursing was offered as an elective which required a further semester of theory and a 6 week clinical placement.

I have concerns regarding the current nursing curriculum and the preparation of undergraduate nursing students (registered and enrolled) coming into the mental health workforce. They often have very little exposure to the theoretical underpinnings of mental health nursing (compared to general nursing) and even less practical exposure. It seems that in the undergraduate environment, mental health nursing is seen as a specialty for those who are interested rather than a core requirement for all nurses.

The 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of adults provides information on the 12-month and lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in the Australian population aged 16–85 years. The survey estimated that almost half (45%) of the population in this age range will experience a mental disorder at some time in their life (about 8.6 million people based on the estimated 2016 population). It also estimated that 1 in 5 (20%) of the population had experienced a common mental disorder in the previous 12 months. Given this data, I would argue that a robust undergraduate nursing curriculum must have a focus on the mental health needs of the community.

There is a huge concern moving forward that we will not be able to provide an appropriately skilled workforce to meet the needs of the mental health service sector. It is an ageing workforce and without a higher profile in undergraduate courses it is very difficult to recruit to the sector. The world is facing a mental health crisis. More and more countries are struggling to deal with an ever-increasing wave of anxiety, depression and stress.

I think it is timely to revisit the undergraduate curriculum and consider a model similar to that of midwifery - having options for nurses to complete a Bachelor of nursing and specialise in mental health (as is the current model) or opt for a straight mental health nursing qualification (as with midwives).

In the UK, there are a number of pathways to becoming a mental health nurse:

- Through university and the completion of a degree in mental health nursing. There are plenty of courses to choose from, with over 60 universities in the UK offering degrees that specialise in mental health nursing.

- Nursing degree apprenticeships - First announced by the UK government in 2014 before being rolled out in September 2017, is time split between studying the theoretical side of nursing, as well as gaining first-hand experience in the workplace. The degrees on offer are equivalent to those obtained at university, however, apprentices are able to graduate with several years of work experience under their belt.

- The postgraduate route - awarded to those who have over 500 hours of clinical practice in health care.

I think now is the time to review our options if we are to ensure a suitably qualified and well skilled mental health workforce into the future.

Thank you for your time.

Melissa Metcalf, Goulburn Valley Health