



New graduate program in advanced practice psychiatric-mental health nursing

Claire Page, Professor, Nursing Department, Université du Québec à Rimouski

Context

The Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec (OIIQ) is currently developing a new mental health specialty and is defining the training and experience legally required to assess mental disorders. This new activity is by virtue of Bill 21: *An Act to amend the Professional Code and other legislative provisions in the field of mental health and human relations* (Office des professions du Québec (OPQ), 2012, OIIQ, 2012). To meet the requirements of this amendment the Université du Québec network has offered a graduate program since 2011. Nearly 50 nurses are registered to this program, and will soon enter the health system under the reserved title Psychiatric-Mental Health Clinical Nurse Specialist (PMH-CNS).

Training that takes the population's needs into account

In Québec, an evaluation of the Mental Health Action Plan 2005-2010 implementation by the MSSS in 2012 indicated that efforts within this plan have helped improve mental health services. It also identifies the need for further progress regarding the participation of family caregivers, the fight against stigma, the transition from current services to primary care or specialized services, and mental health care in emergency departments. The scope and complexity of concurrent disorders are major challenges, as are the particular needs of youth and older people. The contribution of PMH-CNSs is an innovative solution that is in line with recommendations stemming from the MSSS's evaluation.

The relevance of PMH-CNSs

Several articles from the U.S. and Australia have demonstrated the potential benefit of advanced practice mental health nurses (Hanrahan, Delaney and Stuart, 2012; Wheeler and Haber, 2011). These articles address the role of specialized nurses and how their integration may help improve access to mental health services, as well as the possible obstacles to the deployment of these specialists and recommendations to promote their integration. PMH-CNSs will be able to assess mental disorders in all age groups and provide care within a comprehensive approach that integrates not only mental and physical health care, but also partnership based on a therapeutic relationship and health education. These nurse specialists will help patients and their loved ones understand their illness and its effects. They will also accompany them in their decisions regarding possible treatments and the adoption of behaviours conducive to recovery and well-being. In addition to providing clinical follow-up to optimize the management of symptoms and side effects of drugs, the nurses' evidence-based interventions will be adapted according to their clients' priorities, strengths and context.

What literature agrees upon is the importance of having specialized nurses where mental health care is needed most: within the community. Strengthening primary mental health services requires the increased presence of professionals equipped with the right knowledge, skills and attitude to help them adequately assist individuals who have a mental disorder and their loved ones; assess mental disorders and associated physical problems; provide quality care; and ensure clients are guided towards the appropriate services in a timely manner.

Nurses will soon enter the health system under the reserved title Psychiatric-Mental Health Clinical Nurse Specialist.



Graduate program in psychiatric-mental health nursing

This graduate program will enable students to acquire knowledge at the core of all advanced practice (epistemology and research), and more in-depth knowledge on mental health issues, psychopathology, psychopharmacology, assessment of mental disorders, psychotherapeutic interventions for individuals with mild, moderate or severe mental disorders, and concurrent disorders. The necessary skills and attitudes will be developed through internships taking place under the close supervision of professionals who meet the criteria established by the Ordre des psychologues du Québec, in 2012.

The presence of these nurses in general services reinforces the idea that mental health care is delivered with the same rigor as physical health care.

Promising outcomes

Literature indicates that the introduction of specialized psychiatric-mental health nurses in primary care services will result in a number of benefits, including quicker and easier access to care and services; improved collaboration with family doctors; increased client participation in the recovery process; as well as a reduction in use of emergency services and hospitalizations. Promoting physical health, a critical component of recovery, helps diminish the dichotomy between physical and mental health approaches as well as the stigma generated by the fragmentation of services. The presence of these nurses in general services reinforces the idea that mental health care is delivered with the same rigor as physical health care. Studies have shown that integrating specialized mental health nurses in emergency departments would increase staff competence when interacting with individuals who present with a mental health problem; reduce the time spent in the emergency and decrease the stress of staff, clients and their loved ones (Nicholls et al, 2011; Clarke, 2010). The importance of intensifying research on PMH-CNS contribution is a recurring theme in literature.

Outlook for the future

Many PMH-CNSs will likely want to continue their education and become nurse psychotherapists. Moreover, another avenue is quickly opening up in other countries: the nurse practitioner specializing in mental health. Unlike the PMH-CNS, the psychiatric and mental health nurse practitioner can make medical diagnoses, prescribe diagnostic tests and medications, and carry out certain interventions usually reserved for doctors. Although a number of stakeholders support this development in Quebec, it remains controversial.

In conclusion, evidence suggests that, should PMH-CNSs form a critical mass of the workforce and fully exercise their role, they will be valuable resources in helping optimize the use of doctors' skills and improve access to quality mental health care.

Bibliography

1. Clarke, D.E., Dusome, D. & Hughes, L. (2007). Emergency department from the mental health client's perspective. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 16(2), 126-131.
2. Hanrahan, N.P., Delaney, K.R., & Stuart, G.W. (2012). Blueprint for development of the advanced practice psychiatric nurse workforce. *Nursing Outlook*, 60(2), 91-104.
3. Nicholls, D., Gaynor, N., Shafiei, T., Bosanac, P. & Farrell, G. (2011). Mental health nursing in emergency departments: the case for a nurse. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 20(3-4), 530-536.
4. Ordre des infirmières et des infirmiers du Québec (2012). *La spécialité infirmière en santé mentale et psychiatrique intégrant la formation relative à l'évaluation des troubles mentaux*. Québec : OIIQ, 120p.
5. Office des professions du Québec (2012). *Guide explicatif de la Loi modifiant le Code des professions et d'autres dispositions législatives dans le domaine de la santé mentale et des relations humaines*. Québec : OPQ, 87p.
6. Wheeler, K. & Haber, J. (2004). Development of psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner competencies: opportunities for the 21st century. *American Psychiatric Association*, 10(3), 129-138.

quintessence