Community nursing improving health care for homeless people

Through events and consultations held by the Queen’s Nursing Institute’s (QNI) homeless health network, community nurses are identifying emerging issues affecting their patients and their workforce.

SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Community nurses recently met at the Leicester homeless charity Inch Foundation, to discuss better integration in substance misuse and mental health services. Nurses identified changing patterns of drug use between 2010 and 2013, as new psychoactive substances (so-called ‘legal highs’) begin to replace opiates as the new drugs of choice (particularly in criminal justice settings) across the Midlands and North East. Public Health England confirmed that there were 43 different types of novel psychoactive substances in circulation, such as mephedrone. Street names include black mamba, M-CAT and meow meow.

Substances change at frequent speed and although black mamba is now illegal, many others are still legal to sell (if labelled as ‘not for human consumption’). However, there is little hard evidence about their impact on human health. At the Leicester event, nurses said that they had experienced ‘legal high’ users needing defibrillation, and suffering severe physical and mental health reactions including psychosis and profound behaviour change. Public Health England will bring out a toolkit and clinical guidance in response.

David Manley, chair of the national Dual Diagnosis Network identified use of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance, and narrative approaches to therapy as key developments. Psychologist Tara O’Neill emphasised the importance of using psychologically informed environments for patients with histories of complex trauma (often labelled as personality disorder).

Five key tips for community nurses:

- Become familiar with different legal highs, their impacts and national guidance
- If you suspect substance use, ask if patients have taken legal highs
- Complete standard substance misuse and mental health assessments for your patients
- Build a relationship with your patient and be their advocate
- Find exactly what other services need from you when making referrals.

ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

Community nurses working in the area of homelessness also responded to a NICE consultation on antimicrobial resistance. Health professionals have a key role in educating vulnerable and homeless patients on infection prevention and the proper use of antimicrobials.

QNI’s Homeless Health project manager, David Parker-Radford, said: ‘Community nurses are educating vulnerable patient groups to prevent infection through training, peer-schemes, self-care programmes and technology. These schemes make a real difference to public health and it’s vital that commissioners give community nurses the time they need to implement them. The quality and availability of discharge schemes, accommodation and housing provision for people experiencing homelessness are also key defences against infection.’

Nurses told QNI that homeless patients currently present later than others and so have a higher risk of serious infection, and so are a high-needs’ group in terms of antibiotic use. Challenges include encouraging earlier medical attention, ensuring proper adherence and preventing potentially dangerous second-hand use.

STATE OF THE HOMELESS HEALTH SECTOR

One-hundred-and-eighty-four community nurses and other health professionals across England, Wales and Northern Ireland completed the QNI’s annual Homeless Health survey. Key findings included:

- 31% report fewer than five staff
- There are over 67 different assessment tools in use
- Medical services are not accessible enough and do not always offer appropriate services to patients experiencing homelessness
- Improving hospital discharge for homeless patients requires more dedicated accommodation, better communication between services, easier patient follow-up and less stigma from staff and other patients.

Community nurses are encouraged to join the QNI’s Homeless Health Network to receive news and reports, and invites to free networking events at: www.qni.org.uk/for_nurses/homeless_health

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