

The shortage of advanced mental health nurse specialists in South Africa

Mental health nursing is a specialty within nursing. Advanced mental health nurse specialists promote the mental health of individuals, families, groups and communities. They apply the nursing process to assess, diagnose and treat individuals, families, groups or communities with psychiatric disorders, and to identify risk factors for such disorders. Areas of subspecialty include child and adolescent, geriatric, forensic and community mental health nursing, or specialisation in any psychiatric disorder, such as substance use.

As an advanced mental health nurse specialist, I concur with the South African Nursing Council (SANC) that apart from general nurses and midwife practitioners, there is a need for advanced practice nurses, both at public and private mental healthcare institutions. This includes advanced mental health nurse specialists. There are two levels within advanced practice nursing, namely nurse specialists and advanced nurse specialists. According to SANC, nurse specialists require in-depth knowledge and expertise in a specific practice area, such as mental health nursing. A postgraduate diploma is required in order for one to qualify as a nurse specialist. Professional registration with the SANC follows the attainment of this qualification, e.g. nurse specialist: mental health nursing. Advanced nurse specialists must register with the SANC as nurse specialists as an entry requirement. The advanced nurse specialist, in addition to having in-depth clinical specialisation knowledge, has to acquire broader field dynamics at Master's level. This qualification does not result in professional registration, but can be logged as an additional qualification with the SANC.

In 1970, the universities of Orange Free State and Pretoria introduced a basic, integrated degree course that included mental health nursing. This integrated approach was accepted as the model for all basic training in South Africa in 1986. This development opened the way for postgraduate programmes in mental health nursing. The first nurses in

South Africa to receive clinical Master's degrees in mental health nursing did so in 1976.

Despite the qualification in mental health nursing being in existence for 40 years, there is a severe shortage of advanced mental health nurse specialists in South Africa. For instance, there are only five mental health nurse specialists at the local mental healthcare institution where I always refer students for clinical learning. One is in possession of a Master's degree in community mental health nursing, and the other four hold postgraduate diplomas in child and adolescent mental health nursing. It is concerning that some of the professional nurses do not even have a basic qualification in mental health nursing. From the above information, the following questions should be asked:

- What causes high rates of suicides, aggression and violence in mental healthcare institutions?
- What level of care is being received by mental healthcare users?
- What is the role of academics in promoting high-quality mental health care?
- What is the role of SANC in ensuring that all mental healthcare users receive high-quality mental health care, treatment and rehabilitation services in South Africa?

There is a severe need for advanced mental health nurse specialists in South Africa. An adequate number of advanced mental health nurse specialists would benefit individuals, families, groups and communities utilising mental healthcare services in South Africa.

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