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Research Issues in Community Nursing

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FOREWORD

The current pace of change in primary care has an unstoppable momentum. The shape of health and social care services is being transformed as primary care groups evolve, the balance of care continues to shift into the community, and policies promote the involvement of users and carers. However, organisational change on this scale is more often influenced by politics than by research, and this primary care agenda is no exception. Jean McIntosh's book is welcome because it is a timely addition to the relatively sparse research literature on community nursing and because it gives space to the conceptualisation and elucidation of ideas that drive research questions. Theoretical development of this kind is highly important but, in the rush to appraise effectiveness and value for money, is rarely funded. However, if funded time is not given to understanding the concepts of, for example, vulnerability and carer stress, which define the questions and drive the method of empirical study, the quality of research will be diminished.

This book pulls together several important themes, the first being the analysis of the evolution of research questions concerning role definition, boundaries and deployment that have preoccupied both the profession and managers for the past 30 years. The overviews of district nursing and community psychiatric nursing put the contemporary versions of those earlier questions into an interesting and helpful historical perspective. Building knowledge from incremental research of this kind must be articulated and made visible to the research commissioners and policy-makers, who will continue to be preoccupied with these questions as the service changes and adapts to new demands, and as continued quests are made to match roles to service needs.

The second theme that emerges is the detailed discussion of method in some of the chapters. Jean McIntosh and her colleagues' clear exposition of the conceptual framework and methodological development in a study that sets out to explore district nursing skills is an unusual and helpful contribution to research knowledge and understanding. Alison While draws attention to the value of the multimethod approach in a complex field where there are inconsistencies in the definitions used, difficulties in follow-up and important ethical issues related to investigating the needs of and services for families caring for children with life-limiting illness.

The book's third major theme is the meaning of evidence, its value and its application to practice. It is not new for nursing to be exhorted to use research findings, but this view has been reinvented and clothed in different language in the evidence-based practice 'movement'. Sally Kendall and Ros Bryar tackle different aspects of this in a review of the constraints on the utilisation of research in practice and the strategies for overcoming these. This book makes an important contribution to this issue because it provides some of the tools of critical appraisal by its in-depth consideration of selected questions and by giving nurses the mental map containing its own (albeit small-scale) research history, which has been used to build increasing expertise and sophistication in theoretical development as well as the use of appropriate methods. This knowledge is vital if nursing is to enhance its credibility as an equal partner and stakeholder in primary care research and to help us to explore questions on, for example, the nature of nursing and health visiting interventions and whether or not they make a difference.

FIONA ROSS

PROFESSOR OF PRIMARY CARE NURSING

Successive governments have indicated their commitment to enhancing the health of the nation and, in recent years, the focus of care delivery has shifted with escalating speed into the community. In so doing it has become evident that community nurses and health visitors provide the focus for the promotion of health gain, and for the maintenance of positive health status for individuals, groups and local communities. Community nurses and health visitors are destined, therefore, to become leaders in the design, delivery and evaluation of effective health care interventions, informed by academic discovery, and advanced practice skills and competencies.

The changes that confront the contemporary community nursing practitioner are characterised by the diverse nature of the context within which community care is transacted, with an increasing emphasis on inter-sectoral co-operation, interprofessional collaboration, community action and development, and reduced reliance on the acute sector and residential care provision for longer stay client groups.

The impact of change, pushed by a growing demand for flexible, high-quality services provided within local communities, will inevitably shape the NHS of the future. Resources have already been shifted to the community (although at a pace that is all too often criticised as being grossly inadequate to meet client need). Commissioners and providers are now required to demonstrate that the care they purchase and deliver is effective and responsive to the needs of local practice populations. To complement this, community nurses will be required to ensure that their activities make a significant impact on health gain for their practice population and, as such, must become seriously involved in structuring the political agenda that ultimately governs their practice environment.

In order for the community workforce to respond to these challenges, it will be necessary to ensure that community workers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge base to be able to function effectively in the 'new world of community health practice'. Nurses will be required to develop and change, drawing upon the very best of their past experience, and becoming increasingly reliant upon the production of research evidence to inform their future practice.

This series is aimed at practising community nurses and health visitors, their students, managers, professional colleagues and commissioners. It has been designed to provide a broad-ranging synthesis and analysis of the major areas of community activity, and to challenge

models of traditional practice. The texts have been designed specifically to appeal to a range of professional and academic disciplines. Each volume will integrate contemporary research, recent literature and practice examples relating to the effective delivery of health and social care in the community. Community nurses and health visitors are encouraged towards critical exploration and, if necessary, to change their own contribution to health care delivery – at the same time as extending the scope and boundaries of their own practice.

Authors and contributors have been carefully selected. Whether they are nurses or social scientists (or both), their commitment to the further development and enrichment of health science (and nursing as an academic discipline in particular) is unquestionable. The authors all demonstrate knowledge, experience and excellence in curriculum design, and share a commitment to excellence in service delivery. The result is a distillation of a range of contemporary themes, practice examples and recommendations that aim to extend the working environment for practising community nurses and health visitors and, in so doing, improve the health status of their local consumer populations.

Research Issues in Community Nursing, edited by Professor Jean McIntosh, has been written by a team of expert researchers and practitioners that is representative of the context of contemporary community health-care delivery. Together they produce a rich tapestry to illustrate the scope and influence that community nursing research has exerted on the health care agenda. The book provides evidence of the potential role that exists for all community nurse practitioners to aspire towards excellence in their work, based on the synthesis and dissemination of expert evidence to inform clinical/client-focused decision-making in the workplace. The text is based on a vision of the achievable and recognition of the many challenges that confront community practitioners in the advancement of their primary care research role. As such, readers will be challenged to reflect and adopt a systematic approach to research enquiry while being encouraged to integrate theory with practice with the aim of improving client care.

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