



Community Social Care
Degree in Learning Disabilities

V/o:

The shifting boundaries between health and social care inspired the University of Hertfordshire to set up a joint degree in learning disabilities for nurses and social workers, which had its first intake of students in 1996. Anne Belcher, Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Learning Disabilities explains how it evolved.

Anne Belcher:

The course is appropriate for its time because of several major changes happening in the world of learning disability really. I suppose locally here we were very much influenced by the closure of three long-stay hospitals for people with learning disabilities, and my colleagues in the nursing department had always been involved in training staff for those hospitals. So there was a question mark about, you know, the actual training now needed for people that were going to be working with people with learning disabilities in small community homes in more localised services, and also changes with regard to the Community Care Act, and the idea of care management and the role of the care manager was very influential as well in our thinking about developing this course. And the growth of provision in the voluntary sector as well so we began to see that, you know, that the market out there was ready for a course like this.

V/o:

Anna Saunders is a final year student on the course. After her practical experience in health and social care settings, she felt it would meet her vocational needs.

Anna Saunders:

I'd worked for about five years before coming to college with people with learning disabilities in a variety of settings, and when I worked in sort of health-based settings they pushed me to do nursing training, and when I worked in community-based settings they pushed me to do social work training, and I never really felt that either was right for working with people with learning disabilities. I didn't really want to be a nurse or a social worker, I just wanted to work with people with learning disabilities, and so when I saw the course I thought yeah, that's exactly what I want to do really. It qualifies me to go into whatever role I want to go into, so that I can look for the job I want rather than the sort of profession that I want.

V/o:

Margaret Todd is also a Senior Lecturer of the course. She thinks it's filled a real gap in service provision, particularly for people with learning disabilities.

Margaret Todd:

From a lot of the research that's been published, particularly from Mencap, one of the major mistakes appears to be that people with learning disabilities health needs are not being met, particularly where they're living in social care settings, and with their families, and primary health care services appear to be failing people with learning disabilities in relation to meeting their general health care needs. Unqualified carers don't recognise what those health care needs are; social workers don't recognise the health care needs because they've never been trained in that field, and consequently having a fully qualified individual they should be able to recognise and ensure that the health care needs are met, as well as the social care needs.

V/o:

But as Anne Belcher has found uniting two sets of professional skills in one course can be challenging.

Anne:

I think the two disciplines of nursing and social work have an awful lot in common with regard to skills that are required from the two professions, so when we were actually looking at the skills base I would look at commonalities rather than differences, but where there are conflicts at times are between the sort of values of nursing and the values of social work, and things such as if you look at disability, things around sort of the medical model of disability and the social model of disability, and nursing can having quite a strong medical model of disability, and I think at times that can cause the students some difficulties with regard to their value base.

V/o:

Anna has observed through her work placements that more established colleagues have not always welcomed the new approach put forward by the course.

Anna:

Traditionally because people with learning disabilities were always looked after by health, I think they feel why have the social workers never been involved, and they're not going to get involved, and they can't work with them anyway, and we're the profession that's worked with them, and because learning disability nursing has always been under threat, particularly in the last twenty years, and we've had to sort of as learning disability nurses fight for our position, they now feel that this is another way of threatening it and this is another back door way of sort of getting rid of learning disability nursing, whereas actually I feel that it's a way of combining the two and looking at a learning disability practitioner, you know, and a specialist practitioner.

V/o:

Anna's fellow student, Rebecca Leaker, has also found that the course has equipped her with new skills which she has found empowering.

Rebecca:

In bringing in both the social work models and nursing model rather than, well medical model rather than just one, so you're able to notice sort of social care needs of people and their medical needs. I could see how particularly in the next placement we're doing is Community Learning Disability team, and sometimes we're going to be in conflict as to whether, or what is most important – the person's social needs or the medical needs – it may be a case of somebody's diet needing help, but then they don't want to stick to a diet and it could impinge on their health care, but then the social need of them making their own choice and decisions is important as well and I can see how there'll be a conflict between whether I want to take the medical approach or social approach really.

V/o:

Anne Belcher is convinced that it's just the professionals who believe nursing and social work should remain professionally distinct.

Anne:

If you take it from the point of view of the person who's using the service, right, if you take the person with the learning disability and maybe their family, I think if you ask them about the sort of service they're receiving and the input they're receiving from a professional, I don't think they care whether it's a nurse or a social worker who's delivering; I think what they're more interested in is that somebody listens to them and they perhaps get what they're asking for. So that was my sort of drive, if you like, on working on this course. I thought, you know, what I want to see is a better service out there for people with a learning disability and their families. The values that I think are good for working with people with learning disabilities or any people that are perhaps vulnerable or disadvantaged in society, I think should be held commonly by nurses and social workers. I think what often gets in the way is the organisations that are employing professionals and their values that they impose upon people.

V/o:

The lack of identification with a single established profession can be liberating as Anna explains. She hopes the health and social care structures of the 21st century will adapt to include those who've been through the kind of training she has experienced.

Anna:

I think sometimes it can be quite hard to feel your professional identity, certainly in terms of nursing because learning disability nurses are fighting for their profession so much, you feel am I part of that, am I part of fighting for learning disability nursing or not, do I really think that there is a role, and you can be quite confused, who do you identify with, where's your, where is your value system, where's your value base, and also which professional organisation do you join – yes, simple, practical things like that, but I think that is quite often where you draw your strength from and, you know, ask the end conferences do they fit in with me or not, and should I join RCN specialist groups or not – and the same with social work, so it's more personal I think, rather than practice, I think it's more a personal thing, and maybe that will develop in the future as there are more of us. We will have our own groups and our own support systems.