

Differences in understanding of mental health practice issues in undergraduate nursing and paramedic students

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Consumers and carers from rural and regional New South Wales shared their accounts of their lived experience of mental health with undergraduate nursing and paramedic students at a regional university in a collaborative project with an NGO. Students responded to these in a survey immediately following presentations of these stories and a panel discussion of common experiences. They were surveyed again at the end of the session. The survey contained basic demographic data, and a combination of Likert scales and open responses. Ethics permission was obtained and 102 surveys were completed.

Emerging evidence from the literature demonstrates the importance of carer and consumer led education. This is seen to challenge dominant biomedical paradigms and specifically counter stigmatising attitudes. The lived experience provides the opportunity for consumers to speak from a position of expertise, empowering them to address issues of pertinence in interacting with health professionals and the services they provide.

Student demographics between the cohorts were reflective of gender distribution within the professions. Age groups were consistent with an undergraduate population. The differences in the courses included clinical placement specifically in mental health areas for the nursing students only during this session (between the administration of the 1st and 2nd surveys). Nursing students were also much more likely to be employed in health and welfare sectors (as AINs) at the time of the surveys. (46.4%:6.7% of respective respondents).

The findings indicated that students gained new knowledge of issues related to diagnostic difficulties. They also expressed a previous lack of knowledge about the lived experience of people with mental health issues and their carers. The paramedic cohort were more likely to identify issues related to control and management of people experiencing mental health issues, whereas the nursing students were more likely to identify issues related to caring for people experiencing mental health issues and their families, and deficits within mental health services.

Responses indicate that the structure of student courses could be informed by these findings. The imperative that paramedic students perceive of needing to establish control and manage people experiencing mental health issues during their practice may require initial acknowledgement in order to enhance engagement prior to introducing recovery principles. In contrast nursing students initially engage from a caring perspective but may need to better understand the impact of biomedical interventions.