



Royal College
of Nursing



100 years of learning disability nurses



About learning disability nurses



Learning disability nurses do extra things that other nurses don't do. Things that help people with learning disabilities to live the lives they want.



In the past, lots of people with learning disabilities were kept away from other people.



They were forced to live in a type of hospital called an **institution** or an **asylum**.



Nowadays, most institutions are closed.



People with learning disabilities are supported to live at home or in the community.



Learning disability nurses don't just work in hospitals or doctor's surgeries.

They give care and support when and where people need it.



This part of our museum tells you about learning disability nurses. It tells you:

- how learning disability nursing started and what it was like a long time ago
- how things have changed
- what still needs to happen



How learning disability nursing started



In institutions, staff who looked after people with learning disabilities were called **attendants**.



Attendants were trained by doctors called **psychiatrists**. We say this as **sy-ky-a-trist**.

A **psychiatrist** is a special doctor who helps people with serious mental health problems.



Not all attendants had extra training like nurses but they still called themselves a nurse.



Doctors did not understand learning disabilities properly. They treated them as mental health problems.



A new law was made in 1919 called the **Nurses Registration Act**. This law said there must be a list of all nurses in the UK.



It made sure that all nurses in the country had the same training.



The new law said that working with people with learning disabilities was a special type of nursing.



They were called **mental deficiency nurses**.

About institutions and asylums



Doctors were in charge of the institutions.



At first, doctors wanted to make people better so they could live back at home.



But other people thought people with learning disabilities were bad for the community.



A lot of people did not want to see or live near a person with a learning disability.



People with learning disabilities started to be kept in the institutions for a long time. They were not allowed out.



The institutions were very strict. There were lots of rules to follow.



Some institutions became like small communities. They had things like:

- farms
- places to grow food
- churches
- places to make useful things like clothes and shoes





People who lived in institutions also worked there.



In the 1950s some reports were written about the institutions. They said that institutions were not good places to live.



Some problems were:

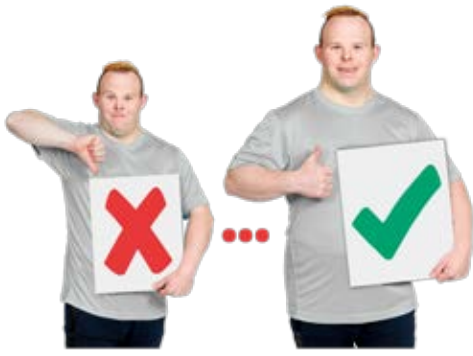
- the buildings were dirty and the furniture was old and dirty



- people who lived there could not have their own private space



- staff did not treat people with respect. They were very bossy and told people what to do



The reports said that institutions needed to give better care and support.

Words people used to use



In the past, people with learning disabilities were called things like: moron, imbecile, feeble minded.

We do not use these words anymore.



At first these words were used by doctors to describe what was wrong with someone.



But other people started to use them as insults and a way to call people names.

Words for learning disability nurses changed too.



They used to be called:

- mental deficiency nurses
- mental subnormality nurses
- mental handicap nurses



This shows that learning disabilities were treated as a mental illness. Doctors and nurses put the condition first, not the person.

Changes to care for people with learning disabilities



There were more reports about institutions between 1970 to 2000.

The reports said that institutions were not looking after people very well.



They found out that people were:

- being left by themselves a lot of the time



- not being looked after properly. Things like being supported to eat or wash



- being hurt by other people



- living in institutions that were not very nice or comfortable



For example, at Normansfield Hospital in London in 1976, the nurses went on strike because conditions in the hospital were so bad.

This means that they stopped working until things got better.



After the reports, care and support for people with learning disabilities began to change.

A learning disability was not treated as an illness anymore.



People with learning disabilities started to be supported to live at home and in their communities.



For some people, it was the first time they were allowed to live at home.

Lots of institutions also began close.



The job of learning disability nurses began to change too. They learned how to support people in lots of different ways.



Things like:

- shopping and cooking



- looking for a job



- meeting friends



- having relationships



**Learning Disability
Nurse**

By the 1990s, nurses had stopped being called mental handicap nurses. They began to be called **Learning Disability Nurses**.



Nowadays, some people with learning disabilities still don't have good care.



Nurses are trying hard to change this.



Rights

Your **rights** are things you are allowed to do and how you should be treated by other people.

This means things like being able to:



- fancy who you want

- get married



- choose your own home or who you live with

- do things you want to do with your life



- have access to the same treatment

People's rights in the past



A law was made in 1913 called the Mental Deficiency Act.



This law said that people with a learning disability had to stay in an institution.



People did not have many rights at all. They were not allowed to get married or choose what they wanted to do with their lives.



Nurses in the institutions followed the law and stopped people having any rights.

The law changed in 1959.



People's rights nowadays

Nowadays some people with learning disabilities still do not have all of their rights.



Nurses do a really important job making sure people with a learning disability have the same rights as everybody else.

What learning disability nursing is like now



Learning disability nurses support people to live better lives.

They work alongside other services, families and carers to give the best support.



But there are still some barriers. People with a learning disability:

- are not always treated fairly or with respect



- cannot always access the right support they need. Support with education, money or living in the community



- can be at risk of other health problems



During the COVID-19 pandemic, some people with a learning disability died because they didn't get the treatment they needed in hospital.



A report said that people with learning disabilities:

- are more likely to be poorly if they get COVID-19



- should get the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible. A vaccine is medicine given in an injection



Learning disability nurses helped write a **petition** together with lots of other people.



A **petition** is a letter asking the Government to change something.

People write their name on the letter to show they agree with it.



The petition said that people with learning disabilities should get the vaccine straightaway.



The petition worked and the Government agreed.



Nurses will keep working hard to support people with learning disabilities.



They will make sure people's rights are respected and people can live the lives they want to.

About some of the pictures we have used



Some of the pictures we have used are owned by other people. These people have said we can use their pictures in this booklet.

Here is where the pictures are from:



Picture on the front page and on page 3:
Group of nurses at Bexley Mental Hospital, Kent.
It was taken in 1925.
It is owned by RCN Archive.



Picture 1 on page 4:
Male attendants at Leavesden Hospital,
Hertfordshire.
It was taken around 1900.
It is owned by Leavesden Hospital History
Association.
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Picture 2 on page 4:
Staff including doctors at Claybury Asylum,
London.
It was taken around 1893.
It is owned by the London & County Photographic
Co., Wellcome Collection.



Picture on page 7:

Brockhall Hospital, Lancashire.

We do not know when this picture was taken.

It is owned by the Lancashire County Council Museum Service.



Picture on page 8:

Women's mental health ward. We do not know where this picture was taken.

It was taken in the early 1900s.

It is owned by the Wellcome Collection.



Picture on page 12 and page 16:

Normansfield Hospital, London.

We do not know when this picture was taken.

It is owned by the Langdon Down Museum.

langdondownmuseum.org.uk/normansfield

