



“Guardians of Dignity and Justice: The Expanding Role of Mental Health Nursing in Human Rights Advocacy”

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Abstract: Mental health nursing occupies a unique and influential position at the intersection of clinical care, ethical responsibility, and social justice. Individuals with mental illness continue to face widespread human rights violations, including stigma, discrimination, coercive treatment practices, neglect, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Mental health nurses, as frontline healthcare providers and patient advocates, are strategically placed to identify, prevent, and address these violations while promoting dignity, autonomy, and equity. This review article explores the evolving role of mental health nursing in human rights advocacy, examining foundational human rights principles, historical and contemporary challenges in mental health care, international legal frameworks, ethical obligations, and evidence-based nursing strategies that promote rights-based practice. The article further discusses barriers to effective advocacy, educational and policy implications, and future directions for strengthening the role of mental health nurses as champions of human rights. By integrating clinical competence with ethical vigilance and advocacy skills, mental health nurses can significantly contribute to transforming mental health systems toward more humane, inclusive, and rights-respecting care.

Keywords: Mental health nursing; human rights; patient advocacy; ethical nursing practice; stigma and discrimination; rights-based mental health care; autonomy; coercive treatment; mental health policy

Introduction

Mental health care has undergone significant transformation over the past century, shifting from custodial and institutional models toward recovery-oriented, community-based, and person-centered approaches. Despite these advancements, people with mental health conditions continue to experience profound violations of their fundamental human rights across healthcare systems worldwide. These violations include involuntary hospitalization without adequate safeguards, forced treatment, inadequate living conditions, lack of informed consent, social exclusion, and systemic discrimination. Mental health nurses, who often maintain the closest and most sustained contact with service users, are

increasingly recognized as key actors in addressing these injustices.

Human rights advocacy is not an optional component of mental health nursing but a core professional responsibility grounded in ethical principles, professional standards, and international legal mandates. Nurses play a pivotal role in ensuring that mental health care respects dignity, autonomy, equality, and participation. This review article aims to critically examine the role of mental health nursing in human rights advocacy, highlighting how nurses can bridge the gap between policy ideals and everyday clinical practice. By situating nursing practice within a human rights framework, the article underscores the necessity of empowering nurses to act as defenders of justice and ethical care.



Conceptual Foundations of Human Rights in Mental Health Care

Human rights are universal, indivisible, and inalienable entitlements inherent to all individuals by virtue of being human. In the context of mental health care, human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to health, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, liberty, privacy, and participation in decision-making. Historically, individuals with mental illness were excluded from these protections, often deemed incapable of exercising rights or making informed choices. The emergence of rights-based approaches to mental health challenges these assumptions by emphasizing legal capacity, supported decision-making, and respect for individual preferences. Mental health nursing practice grounded in human rights requires a paradigm shift from paternalistic care toward partnership-based models that value service users as active participants. Nurses must understand that clinical authority does not supersede human rights but should function in harmony with them to promote recovery and well-being.

Historical Perspective: Mental Health Care and Rights Violations

The history of mental health care is marked by systemic abuse and marginalization. Large psychiatric institutions, prevalent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were often characterized by overcrowding, neglect, coercion, and inhumane treatment. Practices such as prolonged restraint, seclusion, forced medication, and electroconvulsive therapy without consent were widely used, frequently justified under the guise of medical necessity.

Mental health nurses working in these environments were often constrained by institutional norms and limited ethical guidance. However, as deinstitutionalization movements gained momentum and human rights discourse expanded, nursing roles began to evolve. Contemporary mental health nursing increasingly emphasizes advocacy, ethical accountability, and the protection of patient rights. Understanding this historical context is essential for

recognizing the moral imperative for nurses to actively oppose practices that undermine human dignity.

International Human Rights Frameworks Relevant to Mental Health Nursing

Several international legal instruments provide a foundation for human rights advocacy in mental health care. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the inherent dignity and equal rights of all individuals, forming the cornerstone of global human rights law. More specifically, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has profoundly influenced mental health policy and practice by affirming the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities.

The CRPD emphasizes equality before the law, freedom from discrimination, and the right to the highest attainable standard of health without coercion. For mental health nurses, these frameworks translate into practical obligations, such as respecting informed consent, supporting autonomy, and challenging discriminatory practices within healthcare systems. Familiarity with these international standards equips nurses to advocate effectively at both individual and systemic levels.

Ethical Responsibilities of Mental Health Nurses in Human Rights Advocacy

Ethical principles form the backbone of mental health nursing practice and align closely with human rights values. Respect for autonomy requires nurses to honor patients' preferences, values, and choices, even when these differ from professional opinions. Beneficence and non-maleficence compel nurses to promote well-being while preventing harm, including harm arising from coercive or restrictive interventions.

Justice, another fundamental ethical principle, demands equitable access to care and protection from discrimination. Mental health nurses frequently encounter ethical dilemmas where safety concerns appear to conflict with rights-based care. In such situations, advocacy involves seeking the least restrictive alternatives, engaging in ethical reflection, and



collaborating with multidisciplinary teams to uphold patients' rights while ensuring safety.

Advocacy Role of Mental Health Nurses in Clinical Practice

Advocacy is a central function of mental health nursing and encompasses actions aimed at protecting, promoting, and defending the rights of individuals receiving care. At the clinical level, nurses advocate by ensuring informed consent, explaining treatment options in accessible language, and supporting shared decision-making. This role is particularly vital for individuals who may experience communication difficulties, cognitive impairments, or social marginalization. Mental health nurses also act as intermediaries between patients and healthcare systems, voicing concerns about inadequate care, unsafe environments, or rights violations. Through documentation, reporting mechanisms, and ethical consultations, nurses contribute to accountability and transparency. Effective advocacy requires courage, professional integrity, and institutional support, as nurses may face resistance when challenging entrenched practices.

Coercive Practices and Human Rights Concerns

Coercive practices, including involuntary admission, seclusion, restraint, and forced medication, remain contentious issues in mental health care. While sometimes justified as necessary for safety, these interventions raise serious human rights concerns due to their potential to cause physical and psychological harm. Evidence increasingly suggests that coercion undermines therapeutic relationships and may exacerbate trauma.

Mental health nurses play a critical role in minimizing the use of coercion by adopting trauma-informed care, de-escalation techniques, and person-centered interventions. Advocacy in this area involves questioning routine use of restrictive measures, participating in policy development, and promoting alternatives that respect dignity and autonomy. By actively engaging in efforts to reduce coercion, nurses contribute to more humane and ethical mental health services.

Stigma, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion

Stigma and discrimination remain pervasive barriers to the realization of human rights for individuals with mental illness. Negative stereotypes often influence public attitudes, healthcare practices, and policy decisions, leading to social exclusion and unequal treatment. Mental health nurses encounter stigma not only in society but sometimes within healthcare institutions themselves.

Nurses can counter stigma through education, respectful communication, and modeling inclusive attitudes. Advocacy extends beyond clinical settings to community engagement, public awareness campaigns, and collaboration with service user organizations. By challenging discriminatory language and practices, mental health nurses help foster environments that promote acceptance, empowerment, and social inclusion.

Cultural Sensitivity and Human Rights in Mental Health Nursing

Human rights advocacy in mental health nursing must be culturally sensitive and contextually informed. Cultural beliefs influence understandings of mental illness, help-seeking behaviors, and perceptions of care. Failure to consider cultural contexts may result in miscommunication, mistrust, and unintentional rights violations.

Mental health nurses must balance respect for cultural diversity with adherence to universal human rights principles. This involves engaging in culturally competent practice, seeking cultural consultation when needed, and ensuring that care does not perpetuate harm or discrimination. Culturally informed advocacy enhances trust and supports equitable mental health outcomes.

Education and Capacity Building for Rights-Based Nursing Practice

Education is a crucial factor in strengthening the role of mental health nurses as human rights advocates. Nursing curricula should integrate human rights principles, ethical reasoning, and legal knowledge alongside clinical competencies. Continuing professional development



programs can further enhance nurses' confidence and skills in advocacy.

Simulation exercises, case studies, and reflective practice provide opportunities for nurses to navigate complex ethical scenarios. Empowering nurses through education fosters a workforce capable of critically evaluating practices, challenging injustices, and leading reforms in mental health care.

Policy Influence and Leadership in Human Rights Advocacy

Beyond individual advocacy, mental health nurses have the potential to influence policy and system-level change. Nurse leaders and researchers contribute to policy development, guideline formulation, and quality improvement initiatives that embed human rights into mental health services. Participation in professional organizations and interdisciplinary networks amplifies nursing voices in national and international forums.

Leadership in human rights advocacy requires strategic thinking, collaboration, and a commitment to social justice. By engaging in policy discourse, mental health nurses help shape systems that prioritize dignity, equity, and recovery-oriented care.

Barriers to Human Rights Advocacy in Mental Health Nursing

Despite their critical role, mental health nurses face numerous barriers to effective advocacy. These include high workloads, limited resources, hierarchical organizational structures, and fear of professional repercussions. In some settings, lack of legal protection or institutional support may discourage nurses from challenging rights violations.

Addressing these barriers requires organizational commitment, supportive leadership, and clear policies that protect whistleblowers and ethical practitioners. Creating safe spaces for ethical dialogue and advocacy strengthens nursing capacity to uphold human rights.

Future Directions and Implications for Practice

The future of mental health nursing lies in the integration of clinical excellence with robust human rights advocacy. Advances in recovery-oriented care, peer support models, and digital mental health services offer new opportunities to promote autonomy and participation. Ongoing research is needed to evaluate the impact of rights-based interventions on patient outcomes and service quality.

Mental health nurses must continue to evolve as reflective practitioners, educators, and leaders committed to justice and dignity. Strengthening partnerships with service users, policymakers, and communities will further enhance the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

Conclusion

Mental health nursing and human rights advocacy are inseparable components of ethical and effective mental health care. As frontline providers, mental health nurses are uniquely positioned to identify rights violations, support vulnerable individuals, and influence systemic change. By grounding practice in human rights principles, nurses can challenge stigma, reduce coercion, and promote person-centered, equitable care. Strengthening education, leadership, and institutional support is essential for empowering nurses to fulfill their advocacy role. Ultimately, mental health nursing that prioritizes human rights contributes not only to individual recovery but also to the creation of more just and compassionate societies.

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