Advanced Practice in Mental Health Nursing

Advanced practice in mental health nursing is a topic of intense debate in New Zealand as we contemplate changes in provision of mental health care, nursing and education which are driven by a wide range of interests. A local publication then, which offers some clarification of these issues is a welcome addition to the available literature, which is dominated by definitional and legal debates, often with little reference to more fundamental ethical, conceptual and political concerns which underpin mental health nursing at all levels. Clinton and Nelson's book covers a range of clinical issues in mental health, and the variety and scope of chapters offers some challenging and provocative reading. I am left, however, with a sense of wanting more from this publication.

What is advanced practice? This crucial issue is given scant attention notwithstanding the claim in the foreword that ‘individual authors capture the essence of advanced practice ... ’ (p. vii). Clinton's notion of advanced practice as ‘second order’ [sic] reflection which scrutinises and challenges the everyday understandings of the practitioner (p. xiv) is simply too valuable an idea to be consigned to half a page of an introductory chapter. The work of elaborating this idea is left to the contributing authors, but the reader is not provided with an explicit conceptual framework with which to approach the individual chapters. This represents a central dilemma of mental health nursing: that while practitioners have developed expert clinical skills in specialist areas, and nursing has provided some valuable social and theoretical critique of psychiatric practices, theoreticians have not matched this development with a coherent theory of mental health nursing practice. This is reflected in the rather sanguine treatment, in the closing chapter, of the work of Altschul and Peplau. For all the contribution such writers have made to humanistic interpersonal care, their work should not pass without comment on its individualism and lack of contextual depth. Similarly if, as Clinton suggests, mental health nursing should be regarded as a discursive product, this analytical lens should be focused on our own most hallowed traditions, not just on the problematic practices of medical psychiatry.

The range of contributions to this work is impressive, and includes some of the leading international authors in mental health nursing. Their contributions provide readers with an overview of current issues in mental health nursing, and go a long way to meet the editors' goal of emphasising ‘... the consistent concerns that frame practice, approaches to practice and clinical challenges’ (p. xvi). The freedom with which each author has pursued his or her area of interest results in an eclectic set of readings, and is one of the strengths of this book. There is even a healthy tension between the more programmatic and consumer focused approaches, and between the philosophical perspectives of different authors. As Clinton and Nelson observe (p. xiii), the heterogenous nature of mental health nursing has resulted in a necessarily divergent range of perspectives.

My wish list for a second volume includes an elaboration of the valuable notion of second order reflection, preferably set in the context of discussion about the multiple titles and roles associated with advanced practice. Nursing's response to biological reductionism demands specific analysis, especially as some models of advanced practice are linked to increased focus on physical health and prescribing. Clinical issues I would like to see addressed are substance abuse and dual diagnosis, culturally safe care for indigenous and minority populations and a review of the debate around the role of mental health nurses in providing primary health care services. I would also like to see coverage of the debate about the evidence base of practice and the
research issues currently facing mental health nursing.

There is no question that Clinton and Nelson's book will contribute to advanced nursing practice, and will be a valuable resource to those wishing to explore new perspectives and develop new approaches to old debates. Obviously not all issues can be covered in a single volume, and we will not all agree on the relative importance of different issues. For nurses wishing to explore specific issues in mental health nursing this is a rewarding and worthwhile publication; however, those seeking critique and analysis of the concept of advanced practice will have to wait.

Tony O'Brien
Lecturer in Mental Health Nursing
University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand

Mental Health Law in New Zealand

According to the blurb, this book is aimed at mental health professionals and promises to provide rich insights into mental health law in New Zealand. Given that nursing is by far the largest occupational group involved in the care and treatment of people with mental illness, my expectation was that this book would provide some welcome guidance and commentary on some vexing issues that confront nurses working with mental health legislation. For example, at the present time only the Responsible Clinician can dictate the terms of compulsory treatment and it concerns me that for many people what they require and receive is compulsory nursing care. When I purchased the text I hoped that it might illuminate the status of compulsory nursing under the Mental Health Act 1992 and whether or not nurses had any free agency to dictate nursing care. On this count I was disappointed, but on others I was impressed.

The book consists of fourteen chapters, most of which deal with aspects of the Mental Health Act, 1992 including chapters on the statutory definition of mental disorder, special patients, the status of personality disorder under present legislation, treatment, and patient rights. A description is provided of current legal processes involved in compulsory care and treatment. What sets this book apart from the guidelines produced by the Ministry of Health on the application of mental health law, is the insightful commentary on the ongoing development of law and the scholarly synthesis of case law and findings from enquiries in both New Zealand and overseas. The text provides a perspective on the relationship between the two dominant societal institutions involved in social control, that is law and psychiatry, as seen by two eminent lawyers and informed by reference to clinical, sociological and legal literature and comparative analysis of mental health law in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

A cursory reading of this book might suggest that health professions other than psychiatry are invisible under the law. The word ‘nurse’ is conspicuously absent from both the index and the text. While a whole chapter is devoted to the powers of police in relation to mental illness, no mention is made of the powers of the nurse under Section 111 of the Mental Health Act, 1992. This is a major oversight given that the exercise of these powers is a common pathway to compulsory assessment, and there is no clear legal mandate for the use of restraint and containment under such circumstances. The law of course is an evolving thing and it may well be that there is no case law to provide a guide to nurses who need to exercise these powers. The book is rich with case law and, on this count, it is illuminating but it seems that nursing may need to wait for yet another enquiry before its existence is acknowledged.

The text is easy to navigate as a reference book, with a well-constructed Table of Contents and the use of three levels of sub-headings. With some knowledge of the mental health law and aspects of law that remain contentious, for example the meaning of dangerousness, the reader can quickly find relevant commentary. For the novice, a reading of the relevant chapter will provide a coherent and up-to-date overview
of the legal terrain. While the emphasis is rightly placed on the Mental Health Act, the use of other legislation such as the Protection of Personal and Property Rights Act 1998, is integrated into discussion of particular issues as well as addressed in a specific chapter. A chapter on personality disorder and a section on youth suicide provide an informative legal perspective on these issues.

If a 'how to' guide to the law for nurses is what one is looking for then A Guide to the Law for Nurses and Midwives written by Marie Burgess (first published 1993, by Longman Paul Ltd, Auckland) remains the most comprehensive and prescriptive text which has relevance to all New Zealand nurses. Mental Health Law in New Zealand fills a different niche, particularly for those that require greater depth of analysis in the specific area of mental health law. Nurses who assume the role of Duly Authorised Officer, advanced practitioners and educators will find this book a useful resource to have at hand.

Ken Mason, who provides a Foreword to this book, suggests that lawyers and all mental health practitioners will find it immensely informative, and that it will create a more healthy relationship between the two professions. It is informative and highlights present ambiguities in mental health law. If one can look beyond the implicit assumption that nurses and others fall under the rubric, or form some kind of limb of psychiatric medicine, then the reader will be rewarded with an insightful commentary on the tensions between the ‘hard edge’ of the law and the soft and often uncertain field of psychiatry when grappling with the problem of balancing the rights of individuals and society with the need for intervention. I hope the next edition reflects a changed legal and social environment, which acknowledges and values nurses and others as making an important contribution and having a stake in the outcome of mental health care. For now, one would be hard pressed to find a better source from which to build a picture of the reality of mental health law in New Zealand.

Richard Lakeman
Nursing Lecturer
Faculty of Health Studies
Eastern Institute of Technology
Taradale, New Zealand