

Addressing the Health Inequalities of People with Intellectual Disabilities

Summary

Literature reviews commissioned by the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability Services in NI (2006) and the Equality Commission (NI) (2008) have led to an investigation into how people with intellectual disabilities (otherwise known as learning disabilities across the UK) access health information and health services.

Ulster University research underpinned the regional guidance issued in 2010 by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) for all health and social care staff in Northern Ireland. Its aim was to support equity of access to general healthcare for people with intellectual disabilities.

Impact

Ulster University's research led to the development of a 'health passport', which provides a structured nursing assessment and assists in communication between the person with intellectual disabilities and healthcare professionals. In addition, training courses for over 150 general hospital staff in Northern Ireland were devised in collaboration with a theatre company of people with intellectual disabilities. This work has extended to a focus on Type 2 diabetes, and a new project bringing together an inter-disciplinary team of international experts in order to develop and test a structured education programme.

The research supported the appointment and development of nine Health Facilitators for people with intellectual disabilities across Northern Ireland's five Health and Social Care Trusts. Facilitators encourage annual health screens with GPs, and uptake in certain areas has significantly exceeded those reported for other UK regions. Facilitators also support the implementation of health action plans within intellectual disabilities services, and have instigated promotional activities around healthy hearts and exercise.

Ulster University developed a user-friendly information booklet on breast cancer to help women with intellectual disabilities to make more informed decisions about their own health and improve access to screening services. The publication has been circulated within the UK and internationally, and a similar booklet on mental health has also been published.

Ulster research has guided development of best practice standards around care of people with intellectual disabilities in general hospitals which have been implemented by three major hospitals in Northern Ireland. These plans focus on increased use of accessible information; facilitating a comprehensive needs assessment; and improving communication among hospital staff. An innovative e-learning module has been designed for teachers, classroom assistants, Health & Social Care professionals and parents to promote the health of children and adolescents with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Training materials also have been produced to increase the partnership between palliative care and intellectual disability services.

The research undertaken by Ulster University has resulted in specific recommendations in H&SC policy documents aimed at improving access to healthcare for people with intellectual disabilities here and across the UK. These findings were cited in the World Report on Disability produced by the WHO in 2011.