‘If it doesn't work, try a different way’: Exploring the nurse's role in dual disability, mental health and intellectual disability

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The prevalence of mental illness in people with intellectual disability (dual disability) is now well established in the literature. That mental health nurses continue to fulfill the care role for people with dual disability is also known. What ‘best care’ means in relation to this area of mental health nursing is not so well known. Mental health nurses are required to have a unique, expert role to effectively respond to the mental health needs of this population. Preliminary results from a New Zealand study which explored the care of adults with dual disability when admitted for inpatient care in adult acute care mental health units are presented.

An Appreciative Enquiry approach underpinned semi-structured interviews with three groups of key people involved in an inpatient psychiatric admission: people with dual disability, mental health nurses and carers. Data from one of these groups, the mental health nurses (n=13) is presented here. Inductive analysis was undertaken to reveal emergent themes.

These themes revealed that mental health nurses are strongly focussed on developing a therapeutic relationship and maintaining safety while traversing the complexities presented by the dual disability. Nurses described the importance of being adaptive and creative in order to meet the often very diverse and complex needs of each individual, and they expressed concern regarding the absence of education to prepare them to work with this group. In conclusion, the expected outcome of this study is the development of a comprehensive model of care that will incorporate ‘best care’ for people with dual disability and provide guidance for mental health nurses to fulfil this role.