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Qualitative study on the factors and role of residential staff that influence and effect the support provided to adults with intellectual disabilities regarding the expression of their sexuality

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Evidence-Based Nursing

Study type: Qualitative study

Author's declarative title: A qualitative study on the factors and role of residential staff that influence and effect the support provided to adults with intellectual disabilities regarding the expression of their sexuality.

Commentary on: Leclerc M.-J. & Morin D. Factors affecting residential staff's role in supporting the sexuality of adults with intellectual disabilities. *J Appl Res Intellect* 2021. DOI:10.1111/jar.12935

Commentary

Implications for practice and research

- Future research should identify support worker's views and perceptions of the sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities
- An organisational framework to guide support workers is required to develop their knowledge and practice regarding sexuality and people with intellectual disabilities

Context

There has been growing attention on the sexuality needs and concerns of people with intellectual disabilities, set within the wider context of their fundamental right to express their sexuality¹. The work of Leclerc and Morin² highlights the important role of residential support workers in supporting people with intellectual disabilities in the expression of their sexuality. The findings accord the wider research evidence and the need to ensure that professionals have access to education and development¹.

Methods

The primary aim of the study was to identify factors that enabled or inhibited support workers in residential care settings to enable people with intellectual disabilities to express their sexuality. The study adopted a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 12 support workers, 10 women and 2 men working in residential services for people with intellectual disabilities in Quebec, Canada. Thematic data analysis was used to identify four emergent themes.

Findings

Participants ages ranged from 24-44, with a mean of 33 years, working with people with intellectual disabilities for on average 3.5 years working in residential care settings. Four themes were identified from the data; role of support staff, experiences, policies and training. Support workers lacked access to policies to guide their practice and had limited access to education and training to facilitate the development of this aspect of their role. There are opportunities for residential support workers to develop their role in enabling people with intellectual disabilities to express their sexuality and in the promotion of sexual health and well-being. Access to education and training is required to enhance their knowledge, skills and confidence to more effectively support people with intellectual disabilities.

Commentary

This study focused on the role of residential support workers in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to express their sexuality. The findings of the study are reflective of and adds to the body of research evidence regarding that is known regarding the role of support

workers and echo the concerns and possible ways forward.^{1,2} An important finding arising from the study is both the perceived and desired roles of residential support workers in enabling people with intellectual disabilities to express their sexuality in whatever form that may take. This is necessary and important as all people with intellectual disabilities are unique sexual beings with the right and a desire to express their sexuality. Yet historically there has been an assumption that people with intellectual disabilities are either asexual or hypersexual; both are incorrect.¹ People with intellectual disabilities want the same opportunities to express their sexuality as those in the wider population and to experience friendships and intimacy. Some will require support to enable this expression to be a reality.

Residential support workers play key roles in the lives of many people with intellectual disabilities who require access to care and support to be independent. Some people with intellectual disabilities need support to explore, discuss and express their sexuality and this is an important role for residential support workers.^{2,3} However, many residential support workers feel poorly prepared to undertake this critical element of their role, lacking access to organisational policies and procedures that sets out the scope of this element of their practice.^{1,2,3} Another significant issue that needs to be addressed is access to education and practice development that grows the knowledge, skills and confidence of residential support workers to fulfil this element of their role.

References

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Commentator details

Name: Professor Michael Brown

Affiliation: Queen's University Belfast, School of Nursing & Midwifery

Corresponding address: 97 Lisburn Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT9 7BL

Email: m.j.brown@qub.ac.uk

Competing interests

No competing interested declared