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Nurses who completed the Mental Retardation Certificate in New South Wales 1969 - 1985

The New South Wales (NSW) state government established a training scheme and separate register for nurses specialising in the care of people with intellectual disability in 1969 in response to demand for improvement in the care of people with intellectual disability living in large residential institutions. A total of approximately 2,180 nurses completed this specialised training and were awarded a “Mental Retardation Certificate” between 1969 and the discontinuation of the qualification when nursing education was transferred to tertiary education in 1985. We interviewed ten registered nurses who had completed this specialised training in NSW as part of a larger study of the experiences of registered nurses caring for people with intellectual disability between 1960 and 2016. The aim of this paper is to describe participants’ experiences of entering the nursing profession, working as a novice nurse in a large residential institution, and developing relationships with the clients of these institutions in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although participants’ entry pathways varied, their memories of working as a novice and developing relationships with clients were similar regardless of their institutional affiliation or the timing of their training. Participants recalled the physicality of the work and the limited resources, particularly by comparison with the human and material resources available in later years. Repeated interaction with residents over a prolonged period enabled nurses to learn the personal preferences of the residents for whom they cared. Overall, participants described adopting a highly effective and professional approach to the nursing care that, from their perspectives,

contributed to the living of the residents' best lives in the circumstances that prevailed at the time.