

## Page 50

Learning disabilities multiple choice questionnaire

## Page 51

Read Julie Stacey's practice profile on improving nutrition

## Page 52

Guidelines on how to write a practice profile

# Caring for older adults with learning disabilities

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## Summary

Older patients with learning disabilities have greater physical and mental healthcare needs than the general population. However, because of a lack of knowledge about learning disabilities and low confidence in working with this patient group, their healthcare needs are often misinterpreted or neglected. By learning more about this group and developing skills that can aid the nurse-patient relationship, nurses will become more confident in their working practice and older patients with learning disabilities can receive the same quality health service as other patients.

## Author

Nicola Davies is a health researcher, Cranfield University, Cranfield, Bedfordshire, and research officer, University of Oxford, Oxford. Email: n.davies.s06@cranfield.ac.uk

## Keywords

### Learning disabilities; Learning disabilities nursing; Older adults

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## Aims and intended learning outcomes

This article aims to explore some of the difficulties faced by nurses providing health care to older patients with learning disabilities as well as the implications for the quality of care provided. After reading this article and completing the Time out activities you should be able to:

- ▶ Understand the health challenges of older patients with learning disabilities.
- ▶ Understand the effect that a learning disability has on a patient's ability to express his or her healthcare needs.

- ▶ Describe the importance of using the caring relationship between nurses and older patients with learning disabilities to promote good patient care.
- ▶ Identify strategies to improve the care of older patients with learning disabilities.

## Introduction

People with learning disabilities are now living to an average of 50-55 years of age and in some cases up to 70 years (Yang *et al* 2002). This challenges previous beliefs that individuals with learning disabilities do not survive into old age. As recently as a decade ago, it was not recognised that ageing is a life phase for those with learning disabilities; recognition first appeared in the United States in the 1980s. The UK has been slow in reaching this recognition, but this is beginning to change because of the large numbers of people with learning disabilities outliving family carers (Walker and Walker 1998).

To understand the implications of this for nursing, the issues faced by older people with learning disabilities are explored, by discussing the definition of a learning disability and the ageing process. The Department of Health (DH 1995) has defined a learning disability as:

- ▶ Reduced ability to understand new or complex information or to learn new skills – impaired intelligence.
- ▶ Reduced ability to cope independently – impaired social functioning – that started before adulthood with a lasting effect on development.

Learning disabilities can be mild, moderate or severe. Some people with a mild learning disability do not need much support in their daily lives,