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In 2014 a story run in the Age and by the ABC asserted that ‘mental health nursing’ is the ‘most dangerous profession’ in Australia. In the absence of specific registration or statutory endorsement for mental health nurses in Australia, it poses a problem differentiating the ‘mental health nurse’ from the wider pool of registered nurses. According to Health-Workforce Australia (2013) in 2011, 13,232 registered nurses identified that they worked in a mental health setting. That is roughly 6% of the working registered nurse work force. Nurses accounted for 64% of those professionals who work in the mental health field (a figure which is diminishing as a percentage of the overall workforce). The majority of these nurses work in either hospitals (56%) or in state community mental health services (29%).

A serious problem and challenge for the very survival of the specialty is that merely working as a nurse in a mental health service setting is frequently conflated with being a mental health nurse. Presently the only formal recognition that someone has post-registration training in mental health nursing and has sustained some degree of relevant professional development is the ACMHN’s voluntary Credential for Practice Program. In 2014, the number of Credentialed Mental Health Nurses stood at 1320. While this celebrates the number of eligible individuals, only 1 in 10 of those who work in mental health settings and 0.6% of the registered nursing workforce are entitled to be called Credentialed Mental Health Nurses. No one should be in a teaching or leadership position in mental health nursing without holding appropriate qualifications.

Stigma: the reporting of workplace violence and mental health nursing
BY DR RICHARD LAKEMAN, CNC - Acute Care Team - Emergency Department - Cairns Hospital

UK charity Time to Change recently launched an anti-stigma campaign to change the way in which mental health stories are illustrated in the media. The campaign, called ‘Get the Picture’ and backed by Stephen Fry, aims to change the type of images used for stories about mental health. The campaign used ordinary figures, with their heads in hands - known as the ‘headchutcher’. This is a familiar sight when the media are portraying mental illness. These images have the potential to be harmful and aren’t accurate examples of people in distress. One consumer who was interviewed as part of the campaign’s background says the ‘headchutcher’ shots ‘reduce the personhood of whoever is photographed, as their face is barely seen. The face is exactly where we should be looking if we want to check how someone we know is feeling’.

The Director of Time to Change, Sue Baker, says, “One in four of us will have a mental health problem any year, and our responses are remarkably varied. We don’t all spend our time slumped in a corner with our heads in our hands.” The Get the Picture campaign conducted research which found that 80% of the 2,000 respondents felt the ‘headchutcher’ image didn’t convey how it feels to have a mental health problem. As part of the campaign, Time to Change has made available a series of photos that are free to use by the media. Time to Change feel that these photos more accurately portray mental illness and mental health.

The available photos include images of mental health consumers doing every day activities and anonymous photographs (sensitively shot) that show more face than usual. The ultimate goal of Time to Change is to end mental health stigma.