

Also inside...
Learning disability nursing
Performing the last offices

The magazine for RCNSTUDENTS

summer 2010

the answer



Caring together

Celebrating students
at **RCN Congress 2010**



Royal College
of Nursing



Seizing the day

Students share their highlights of RCN Congress 2010

Tuesday of Congress week saw nursing students descend on Bournemouth in their masses. More than 700 members showed their presence in pink. But with so much to see and do, what were the highlights for those who were there?



Charlotte Sansom

"The political speakers were my favourite by far. Congress is great for seizing unprecedented opportunities like these."



Alex Caldwell

"I love the relaxed atmosphere here. There is a real sense of community and it has been great to speak to qualified nurses who feel so passionate about the profession."



Paul Young

"The highlight for me has been seeing so many students here. It shows they still want to be involved with shaping the future of nursing."



Shazeda Begum

"I don't know what I've been doing for the last three years. This has been my first time at Congress and the whole experience has been amazing. I met Peter Carter personally and he really took an interest in what I had to say."



Aruliya Janathanan

"The student seminar on the transition to staff nurse was my best bit. It's given me reassurance that qualifying will be OK."

CARING TOGETHER
RCN Congress & Exhibition 2010

Editorial



It was amazing to see so many of you at RCN Congress this year. Students' Day brought a real buzz to Bournemouth and the presence of people in pink didn't fail to go unnoticed. If you didn't manage to make it, check out page six for a full report of what went on.

However, it's never too early to plan for next year. We'll be travelling to lively Liverpool where all the student action will happen on Tuesday 12 April.

What an interesting time we've had over the past few months. We have a new governmental structure and are still to see what impact this will have on nurse education and student support.

It would be good to hear from you about the effect this is having at your university. Are your intake numbers changing? Are your lecturing staff being made redundant? If you're newly registered, do you have a job to go to?

Do let us know by emailing ans@rcn.org.uk and you can be assured that the RCN is fighting with you and for you to help make your education and transition into the registered workforce as smooth as possible.

You can also make sure your voice is heard within the College by using your vote in the RCN elections. There are students standing for seats on their regional board, the Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee and for RCN Council. Each one of the candidates is passionate and excited about the prospect of making a difference to you so make sure you get involved and have a say in who represents you in the future. A full list of candidates can be found on the RCN website and ballot papers will be sent to you in the post.

The student team are still out and about on the RCN Bus so please come and see us when we're in your area. A list of locations we're due to visit can be found at www.rcn.org.uk/studentbus

There are some fascinating articles in this issue of *the answer* – many student experiences and much learning. Take it, use it, enjoy it, and remember – if you fancy putting pen to paper for the next issue, your submissions are always welcome. Email theanswer@rcn.org.uk to find out more.

Gill Robertson
RCN Student Adviser

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the answer
Editor: Kimberley Bell
Production: Mark Kalaher
Designer: Dekko Advertising & Design
Published by: Royal College of Nursing, 20 Cavendish Square London W1G 0RN
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Student activists win new RCN awards

The first awards for student activists were presented at RCN Congress in Bournemouth to Jennifer Luchoomun and Charles Sloan. The awards, aimed at recognising the contribution of student representatives, were created following a gift by Professor Dame Betty Kershaw and her family to support continuing professional development.

Jennifer was inspired to become an activist after attending an RCN Student Roadshow and later represented students in London on the Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee. She significantly increased the number of student information officers in the region and set up regular meetings for them to share information and increase support available to members.

Charles formerly represented Scotland on the ANS Executive Committee and enjoyed speaking up for students at a regional and national level. He took the diploma route into nursing and is now a registered learning disability nurse. He has since started the first module of a degree and intends to use his award to complete two further modules required to obtain a full degree.

He said: "It's an honour to have received this award. You don't become a rep expecting to receive anything back. You do it to help improve conditions at your university and to help your fellow students. I will use this award to develop and improve."



Chair of RCN Council Sandra James joins Jennifer and Charles in celebrating their awards

A prompt about preceptorship

As of 1 April 2010 all newly qualified nurses in England should have a formal programme of preceptorship in their place of work. NHS employers should be complying with a framework for good practice and those recently registered should feel supported when starting out in their careers.

The RCN submitted evidence in favour of this move and is keen to ensure that employers are fulfilling their duty. When you come to qualify, be sure to ask about the preceptorship programme in your place of work. If you experience a lack of support or don't feel that your preceptorship is adequate, please contact the RCN so action can be taken on your behalf. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/nqn to find more details about the preceptorship framework and what you can expect from your employers.

Applications increase but places diminish

The RCN has welcomed news that applications to study nursing at degree level have increased, but has expressed concern that places available are being cut. UCAS applications have risen by as much as 73 per cent but there are fears that there will be a lack of course places to accommodate the increased level of interest.

RCN Chief Executive Dr Peter Carter said: "It is very encouraging that so many people of all ages are choosing a career in nursing, and that they are pursuing the graduate route into the profession. Due to increasing demands on the health service, nursing care in the future will only become more valuable, and at the same time more complex. We need to ensure that there is a good supply of well trained, caring people going into nursing."

But Dr Carter's comments came with a word of warning. He added: "We need to ensure that an adequate number of places are available for people with the skills and the commitment to study nursing. We also need to make sure that students have the right financial support and the right pastoral care so that they continue their studies and become excellent nurses."

The RCN is working alongside *Nursing Standard* to try and find out more information about the number of student places universities plan to cut. It is committed to campaigning against such potential losses and will represent your interests at every level.

Take pride in nursing

Nursing practice may have changed throughout history but the drive to deliver safe, quality care and the satisfaction derived from that has changed little throughout the ages. A new RCN film called *Pride in Nursing* looks at the stories of four RCN members alongside clips from the RCN Archives and finds these themes are as strong today as ever. Stephen Sloane offers the student perspective in the film, which will be used to recruit and retain members over the coming months. You can watch it online at www.youtube.com/user/RCNonline or on the homepage of the RCN website, and use it in your universities to spread the word about the benefits of the RCN.

With you every step of the way

The RCN has recently launched a range of resources especially for newly qualified nurses. An online community, information leaflet and area of the RCN Discussion Zone have been created specifically for those starting out in their careers.

The resources have been produced in response to a survey which showed that third year students and newly qualified nurses would like the opportunity to network with their peers and have access to relevant products and services to support their transition from student to nurse.

You can access the online network by going to www.rcn.org.uk/nqn. Here you should find everything you need to know about the unique challenges and opportunities as a newly qualified nurse and how the RCN can help you every step of the way.

Whether you're looking for advice, personal or professional support, networking opportunities or access to discounts on products and services, you'll find everything you need within the newly qualified nurses' online community.



Northern Ireland nursing student of the year announced

Margaret Harris won the Student Award at the RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Awards last month. Margaret is a health care assistant employed by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and is undertaking nurse training via the Open University.

She was nominated for her work in developing a pain score and associated guidelines to detect early warning signs in patients who have undergone surgery. She got involved in the work while on placement and was instrumental in getting the pain chart translated in to the nine most commonly used languages in Northern Ireland.

Lead nurse Mary Neeson nominated Margaret for the award and described her as "truly inspirational." She said: "Margaret made a major contribution to evidence-based nursing practice in the surgical wards and, in so doing, improved patient safety. She is consistently enthusiastic and passionate, and brings a genuine joy to her work."

The runner up in the awards was Andrea Craig who was nominated for developing a forum for children and adolescents with mental health problems to socialise and connect. She also took the Open University route in to nurse training and was working part-time as a health care assistant when she got nominated for the award.

Become a friend of Médecins Sans Frontières

Ever thought about the role nursing plays in emergency humanitarian responses? Want to find out how putting both ideals and medical skills into practice can help in regions of the world where they are most needed and scarce? If so, becoming a member of Friends of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) could be for you.

MSF is an international humanitarian aid organisation established to provide care for people in need of medical assistance regardless of their race, religion, politics or gender. Nurses form a very important component of every MSF team which operates in the field and their expertise and skills mean people in the greatest need have access to health care.

The Friends of MSF are student societies based at universities around the UK and Ireland. Their aim is to raise awareness of humanitarian situations, to encourage students to consider working for organisations such as MSF in the future and to raise funds.

Friends of MSF are very keen to get more nursing students involved through the establishment of friends groups at nursing schools around the country. They will support you while you launch your society and they have a wealth of resources to help with hosting events.

Go to www.msf.org.uk/friends to find out more or email newgroups.fomssf@googlemail.com to express your interest.

Put pen to paper and win

The RCN is always keen to hear the views of nursing students and encourages all members to submit articles for inclusion in *the answer*. However, now there is an extra incentive for you to put pen to paper. Two book vouchers worth £25 each are available to win for the best features sent in for the next issue. Email theanswer@rcn.org.uk to find out more.

Caring together

RCN Congress is the biggest event in the nursing calendar. It's an opportunity to get together, share knowledge, debate the future and shape the profession. Members of the Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee share their highlights from a momentous week in Bournemouth

Congress always promises to excite and inspire. It's an opportunity for all of us to broaden our knowledge and directly influence the future of nursing. This year didn't disappoint. There were intense debates, moving speeches, chances to hear from key political figures and a special day just for students that saw hundreds gather from far and wide.

The theme of this year's event was *Caring together*, illustrating the importance of the entire nursing team in delivering consistent, quality patient care. As nursing staff of all levels and specialties gathered at Congress, we were made to feel part of the RCN family where old friends and new met up to celebrate our great profession.

The student action began on Sunday evening with the awards ceremony acknowledging the important contribution of student activists for the very first time. Former ANS Executive Committee members Jennifer Luchoomun and Charles Sloan accepted their honours to the sound of rapturous applause from students in the hall.

As the light lifted on a new day and pre-election hype reached fever pitch, it was with great excitement that we discovered the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown would be appearing at Congress. He took to the stage as a sea of people looked on and paid tribute to nursing staff who he described as "angels dressed in nurses' uniforms performing the most amazing works of mercy and care".

Tuesday morning rolled around and people in pink started to descend on Bournemouth. Before long, nursing and midwifery students were everywhere, using the morning to check out the exhibition, go to fringe events and spend time in the debating hall. Then it was time to walk over to the Pavilion Theatre where the true Students' Day action was to begin.

Harvey Morgan, Chair of the ANS, began proceedings with a reflective speech on how important RCN students have been in shaping the profession over the previous year. He spoke of his pride at being in the role and encouraged others to get involved. "We're referred to as the future," he said, "but we're here and now as well."

Harvey was followed on stage by image consultant Billy Dixon who gave an hilarious insight into methods of self assertiveness and how to carve out a successful career. Then followed an enthusiastic talk on how nursing research can be an exciting aspect of your training and future, before students headed back to the main hall to see Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg and then Shadow Health Secretary Andrew Lansley speak about their vision for the future of health care.

Mr Clegg thought NHS staff should have greater control over the health service and said: "You should be telling us how to run it, not the other way round." Mr Lansley pledged to empower nursing staff, particularly around patient safety.

The end of the day saw us heading back to the Pavilion for more student-specific advice. We heard how to tailor our care to suit the needs of people with learning disabilities and got top tips on surviving post-qualification.

In the evening, student members were treated to a barbecue in the sunshine, with the sounds of a steel band gently washing over us. Entertainment was provided by the fully inclusive band, MiXit, and we danced the night away at the student pink party.

The rest of the week went by in a whirl with more debates to get the grey matter working. Among the highlights were discussions on the early sexualisation of young girls, whether observing patients at risk works, and whether health care professionals should be given priority access to treatment services.

One speech that really hit a chord was that of broadcaster Angela Rippon whose heartfelt and impassioned address to Congress brought a tear to many an eye. She described her experience of caring for her mother with dementia and called for all nursing staff to be trained in dealing with the condition. The following day, an emergency resolution was put forward on the issue. It called on RCN Council to take action for dementia education and was passed by 99 per cent of the vote.

Congress this year was a momentous week and an experience not to be missed. Make sure you're there to make history next year. Students' Day in Liverpool on April 12.

For more details of what happened, go to www.rcn.org.uk/congress where you'll find debate reports, photo libraries, webcasts and more.



Dignity in death

First year nursing student Tom Kingsley shares his experience of performing the last offices and explains why ensuring dignity in death is so important to him

A few years ago I was an account manager working for an international marketing agency. I loved my job, and little did I know that a career change would come. Then a dear friend developed bladder cancer. I helped care for her throughout an incredibly brave two year battle, and finally stayed with her during her last long night when she died at home.

Throughout her treatment I came into contact with some memorable and inspiring nurses, each of whom made a significant and positive impact on my friend. The experience prompted me to investigate a change in career to nursing. I quit my job and began training in September 2009.

Lessons on the last offices

Our first module was classroom-based and covered a wide range of topics designed as a general introduction to nursing. One session that stood out for me was on care of the deceased, which included how to perform the last offices.

For the uninitiated, performing the last offices involves the physical care and preparation of a patient immediately following their death. It's considered a way to care for, and show respect to the patient, even after they've taken their last breath.

My first placement was on a medical ward in a major hospital and a week in, I found myself working a night shift with my mentor. One of our patients was an elderly lady who was blind, bed-bound, and totally reliant on assistance for her activities of daily living. Unfortunately, she was suffering complications from several acute illnesses and we were aware that the prognosis was poor.

Not long after our shift had begun, my mentor introduced herself to the patient, instantly building a rapport. She took the time to ask the patient how she could help to make her comfortable. We provided her with mouth care, personal hygiene, fresh sheets and night clothes. As we finished, my mentor asked if there was anything else she could do, and the patient asked her to pluck the hairs from her chin.

What struck me was the physical gentleness and emotional compassion my mentor showed to the patient. She didn't rush her work and instead spent just a few more minutes than usual to ensure that she talked with the patient, asking her what she wanted, offering her options, listening to her, and giving her space and attention. The lady expressed deep appreciation for the care and attention she received. It was care with kindness, and it was a pleasure to witness, assist with, and learn from.

Putting it into practice

Late into the night the patient died. The medics arrived swiftly, and they confirmed her death there and then. It had been a peaceful and yet unavoidable end.

Together with my mentor, we gathered everything we needed to perform the last offices. As this was my first time, I let my mentor know that I needed her to guide me. I'm not sure if it was the lateness of the hour, or the significance of the moment, but my mind had gone blank, the classroom lesson forgotten.

We drew the bedside curtains, and went to work. We carefully removed a cannula, and dressed the wound. We closed the patient's eyes, and washed her. We cleaned and replaced her dentures, and removed and documented her jewellery. We changed her into fresh clothes, brushed her hair, and wrapped her in a fresh white sheet. We completed the notification of death cards and attached these to the patient, one under the sheet, one outside.

What struck me was that throughout this process my mentor ensured the dignity of the patient, treating her with respect and sensitivity. Her care was as thoughtful and kind as it had been when the patient was alive.

I felt so privileged to be a part of this rite of passage. It was an intimate moment, and it felt deeply moving. The patient had trusted us enough to allow us to care for her when she was alive, and now that she was dead it felt important to continue to mark this respect.

Eighteen months ago, as I prepared to leave the office behind, I never imagined that instead of interacting with a computer I would be nursing, bringing me so close to patients, in both life and death.

Tom is a first year adult nursing student at Brighton University

Dignity

At the heart of everything we do

The RCN believes that every member of the nursing workforce should prioritise dignity in care, placing it at the heart of everything we do. A successful campaign was launched on this basis and a number of learning resources were developed at that time. They include publications, training films and an interactive online learning module. These are still available for use by members and more information can be obtained from www.rcn.org.uk/dignity

Making a difference

Kim Bell looks at why nursing students need to know about learning disabilities and examines what the RCN is doing to ensure equality of care

People with learning disabilities are twice as likely to be admitted to hospital compared to the general population and on average have shorter life expectancies. They are more likely to suffer from physical health complications and are more dependent on health services than most other sectors of society. The likelihood is that at some point in your nursing career, regardless of your specialty, you will have a duty of care to a person with a learning disability.

Will you be prepared?

The RCN is concerned that pre-registration education does not adequately equip nurses to deal with the increased needs of people with learning disabilities. While the extent of training delivered to non learning disability nursing students varies between institutions, in the worst cases it can involve just a single hour-long lecture in the first year of training. This is likely to be long forgotten by the time it needs to be implemented and may not be sufficient to prepare you for the future.

Since the closure of large residential hospitals and the advent of care in the community there is an expectation that all health care staff will have knowledge of learning disabilities.

RCN member and specialist nurse David Brown raised concerns about this when he spoke at Congress earlier this year.

He said: "The people I work with have moved out of the old learning disability hospitals and they're living alongside you in ordinary houses, in ordinary streets. They now go to ordinary dentists, ordinary GPs, and when they're ill or injured they're admitted to ordinary wards and ordinary outpatients' clinics. In many cases these places are simply not prepared for the extra level of need these people present. People die as a result. Let's not continue to fail them."

This sentiment is shared by learning disability nursing student Lisa Osinibi who chose to study the specialty after witnessing poor care. She says: "I worked as a care assistant on a general adult ward before I went to university. There was a lady there with severe learning disabilities and the nursing staff really struggled to communicate with her. She was considered a difficult and bad tempered patient but all she needed was someone to take the time to talk to her. It soon became clear that her needs went beyond those of simply providing medical care. It inspired me to find out more and carve out a career working with people like her."

Training places dwindling

The issues extend further than a lack of training. The RCN also has concerns about the dwindling number of places for learning disability nursing students and fears a lack of placement opportunities in certain areas. This isn't true of all parts of the UK but according to Michael Brown, Chair of the RCN Learning Disability Nursing Forum, it shows a lack of consistency and strategic vision for the future of the specialty.

He believes more must be done to promote the image of learning disability nursing and that ignorance and misunderstanding means it is regarded as a less skilled and less important area of practice. "I come across a lot of disinterest in LD nursing from people working in the wider profession," he says. "They seem to see it as the poor relation of nursing and think it is better described as social care. The reality is that it bridges the gap between the two. If people with a responsibility for planning and commissioning established better strategies for meeting the combined needs of LD patients, it would be a great model for treating patient groups with similar requirements."

Newly qualified learning disability nurse Rachael Done thinks her role does involve different skills to those of her adult nursing colleagues but that they are equally valuable and make a real difference to the lives of the most vulnerable. "Communication and patience are my most important attributes," she says. "You need to have an open mind when caring for a person with learning disabilities. You have to think on your feet and be resourceful. Some of my clients don't have verbal skills so I have to use other methods to find out how they're feeling. Sometimes this involves picture boards but other times you need to be more inventive than that."

Lisa agrees. She says: "Learning disability nursing is more holistic. It's not about just treating a wound or addressing one health complaint. It's about making various adjustments to help people with their daily living. You need to know how to empathise and assess critically. Some people can't express that they're in pain so you must be very perceptive and go to extra lengths to assist their needs."

Needless deaths

Evidence shows inequalities still exist at every stage of the health care system and that people with learning disabilities often receive poorer quality care than their non-disabled peers. The RCN is committed to challenging this situation and is exploring a number of work streams to address the issues mentioned here.

At RCN Congress earlier this year, a resolution called on Council to lobby for a learning disability liaison nurse in every hospital. The debate provoked poignant stories of needless loss and was passed with 93 per cent of the vote.

One member described a serious untoward incident involving a patient with a significant learning disability at his hospital. The patient was 20 years old and admitted with pneumonia. It was identified that he had difficulties with feeding and a chart was set up to monitor his intake. Ten days later he died.

The member said: "The chart had been filled in every day for every meal but it said 'Breakfast: two spoons of porridge; lunch: three spoons of peas; tea: two spoons of ice cream.' For ten days. After which, sadly, he died. Now I couldn't say for certain that we killed him, but we certainly didn't help him. We had a learning disability liaison nurse in post but unfortunately, for those ten days, she was off sick."

The way forward

The RCN is now exploring ways to bring about change for those with learning difficulties treated poorly by the health care system. It aims to make learning disability nursing a more attractive career option and to encourage members to learn more about how to care for this group of people, regardless of their area of practice.

Rachael concludes: "I love my job and can't imagine doing anything else now. I went in to learning disability nursing because I enjoy providing the person-centred and intensity of care it requires. Now I'm excited about going further in my career and exploring all the job opportunities my training opens up."

The RCN has produced a number of publications to support nursing staff in delivering quality health care to people with learning disabilities. These can be searched for and accessed at www.rcn.org.uk/publications. For more information about the Learning Disability Nursing Forum, go to www.rcn.org.uk/learning_disabilities and to see an archive webcast of the Congress debate mentioned above, see www.rcn.org.uk/congress



Fight the fear

Bullying and harassment in the health sector can be commonplace but there are ways to tackle the problem. The RCN Student Team shares some advice

As a student, you should be treated fairly and consistently, with dignity and respect, wherever you study or work. You should be free from undue stress, anxiety or fear. You should have the confidence to be the best you can and have the opportunity to develop and grow. You should be able to expect all of these things and believe that others will behave in accordance with them too.

It sounds like an ideal world and for some it might seem that way at times. The reality is that you may well come into contact with bullying and harassment at some stage during your training. It's a considerable problem in the health sector and whether you suffer yourself, or see others having problems, there could be times when you need help and support.

What the stats say

A survey conducted last year by the RCN found that 30% of nurses in NHS hospitals believe bullying and harassment is an issue where they work. It reveals a climate of fear and intimidation which may well affect you when on practice placements.

An anonymous letter sent to the RCN outlines the extent of the problem. The author, who has now qualified, writes: "As a male student nurse I was bullied on several occasions by both male and female nurses during various placements. One episode involved the ward manager who word for word used the exact speech and manner towards me that she had used several times before, also on a gay male student nurse and other nursing students, all of which resulted in students reduced to tears and leaving the ward."

Recognise the problem

The key is recognising when there is a real problem and using the right tools to manage and address the issue. Some years ago the RCN produced a guide specifically for nursing and midwifery students entitled *Dealing with bullying and harassment*. This is still available to download from the RCN website and includes practical advice as well as a section for nurse educators on how best to support those who are experiencing difficulties.

RCN Student Adviser Gill Robertson thinks recognising bullying can be problematic and caution should be taken before official complaints are made. She says: "Nursing is a disciplined profession and by its very nature has leaders who need to be assertive. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. We need commitment to high standards to get proper patient care. It's when this power and authority is abused that there is a problem."

Seek advice

To decipher whether behaviour is bullying, the RCN advises talking informally to someone in the first instance. You might want to chat to your student representative, friends, family, trusted colleagues, your practice mentor or a personal tutor. It's up to you who, but this will help you grasp what's happening and decide if you have a genuine problem.

It's also important to keep a written record of incidents. This can be therapeutic for you, and help clarify exactly what's happening so you can do something about it. If you decide later on to make a formal complaint, this diary of events will provide vital evidence.

Remember to keep your notes short and simple, and write down details as soon as possible after the incident so they're fresh in your mind. You'll need to include things like the date, time, location and nature of the incident, your response and feelings at the time, who it involved and what action you took.

Take action

If you believe that bullying and harassment is genuinely taking place, it's important you take action. Although speaking out can seem scary, your university or workplace is likely to have formal policies to deal properly with such issues without the need for you to fear recriminations.

Gill adds: "The fact remains that until you do something about it, it's unlikely that the bully or harasser will stop. It's much better for your wellbeing if you take action, and to help others in the future by showing that bullying won't be tolerated. Remember, don't blame yourself for what you're experiencing, and please don't feel you have to wait until you're at breaking point before you take action."

Further support

The guide *Dealing with bullying and harassment* (see right) outlines the options for progressing a complaint. This can be of a formal or informal nature dependent on how you feel the issue should be escalated. Should you be experiencing symptoms of stress or anxiety, the RCN's confidential Counselling Service might help. This is available free of charge to student members. Call **0345 769 7064** to enquire about getting an appointment.



Nursing dreams in clear view

Matthew Parkin always wanted to become a nurse. He feels driven by the desire to help people and make a real difference to those in need. But when he applied for nurse training he was devastated to be declared unfit to practise. Kim Bell reports

Matthew is a second year adult nursing student. He's passionate about the profession and hopes to specialise in intensive care nursing when he qualifies. He likes going out with his mates and exploring foreign climes. He's charismatic, caring and kind. In many ways he's just like any other nursing student you're likely to meet.

But in other ways Matthew is very different. He's blind in one eye, visually impaired in the other and has had to fight for his dream of becoming a nurse. Matthew was born early and has a condition called retinopathy of prematurity. It means he can only see things six feet away when a person with good vision could see them at 18. The blindness in his left eye also causes problems with him judging depth and he has no 3D vision.

Matthew has always taken a proactive approach to meeting the challenges posed by his visual impairment and doesn't think of himself as having a disability. "I've had 21 years to figure this out," he says, "and unless I deliberately tell someone about my eyesight, they wouldn't know I had a problem. It doesn't stop me achieving anything and I've come to know my limitations so take extra care and put in more effort to overcome any obstacles."

The journey begins

After attending a sixth form very supportive of his needs, Matthew assumed the transition to nurse training would be smooth and stress free. He applied to a number of universities but soon discovered that his journey to become qualified would be far from simple.

"The first university I approached asked about disability on the application form so they invited me in for an occupational health assessment. The clinician took one look at my notes and wrote me off straight away. I was told I was unfit to practise and would pose a risk to both myself and patients. My whole world came crashing down. I wasn't even given the opportunity to be tested so I could prove how able I am," Matthew says.

From that point Matthew applied to a further two universities. One carried out a full practical assessment of his visual impairment, considered his problems not to be limiting, and passed him fit to pursue nurse training. The other didn't include questions about disability on their application form and offered Matthew a place with no testing required. He accepted this offer and started training in September 2007.

RCN Disabled Nurses Network

The RCN's Welfare Rights and Guidance team has set up a network of members who are training or working in clinical practice and define themselves as disabled. The purpose of the Disabled Nurses Network is to link members together for peer support and to share information on adjustments they have made to their working practice that allow them to continue nursing. For more information contact wrg@rcn.org.uk or phone **0345 408 3491**.

The challenges continue

It soon became clear there were more obstacles ahead. A month in to the course it was highlighted that Matthew hadn't had an occupational health check. He was instantly labelled unfit to practise, stopped from going on placement and told the situation would not change until he was assessed by occupational health specialists in practical settings. He continued with his studies in the hope the process would be swift.

Four months later an assessment was arranged but by that time Matthew had missed an assignment and three weeks of placement. He felt disadvantaged by his circumstances yet remained convinced he was right for the course.

"When I was finally brought to a clinical assessment room, the occupational health team watched how I overcame my visual problems. I was set a number of tasks and proved that I could be a safe and responsible practitioner. They let me continue my course but by then I had become disheartened by the experience. It had tarnished what I hoped to be the best few years of my life."

The future is bright

Matthew decided to take a few months out and start the course afresh the following year. He hopes sharing his experience will encourage universities to adopt clear guidelines on how to assess disabled students for eligibility to nurse training. The RCN is looking in to creating such guidance and is keen to hear from other nursing students who have experiences, good or bad, of accessing university courses. Email us at theanswer@rcn.org.uk to share your story.

When asked what he would have done if he hadn't been allowed to continue in nursing, Matthew says: "I never wanted to be anything but a nurse. I was heartbroken to think I might not be able to overcome my visual problems when I had always overcome them before. But I am grateful my university has chosen to accept me, to work with me, and now in my second year, I am able to prove that I can succeed. I look forward to my nursing career."

Across the UK

SCOTLAND

Helping us help you

Student information officers (SIOs) from across Scotland gathered in Edinburgh recently for a special networking day hosted by the RCN. The event aimed to connect student activists so they can learn from each other's experiences and better help you as members. There was also an opportunity for those there to speak directly to RCN Scotland Director Theresa Fyffe.

ANS Executive Committee Member Karen Winchcombe said: "It was great to get the student voice heard and alert key people in the RCN to issues that exist for students up and down the country. This year will be an important time for us to influence the political agenda so I would urge everyone to get involved with the RCN's campaigning work."

To find out more about becoming an SIO go to www.rcn.org.uk/sio or to get involved with the campaigning work of RCN Scotland contact Elinor Jayne on 0131 662 6173 or email elinor.jayne@rcn.org.uk

NORTHERN IRELAND

RCN conference proves a big hit in Ulster

More than 200 nursing students attended a conference hosted by the RCN in partnership with the University of Ulster last month. The full day event covered a range of topics such as the transition from student to staff nurse, a focus on finance, and dispelling legal myths. Those who attended heard from the Director of Nursing at the Public Health Agency, Mary Hinds, and also received top tips for survival from RCN Student Adviser Gill Robertson.

Joanne Sharkey, ANS Executive Committee Member for Northern Ireland, said: "It's been a fantastic day for informing people about the RCN and getting them excited about becoming involved. Lots of students said they were impressed by what resources are available and seemed keen to join up."

The RCN has recently recruited three new student information officers at Queen's University in Belfast and is keen to increase its presence there further. An event, similar to the one mentioned above, is provisionally planned to take place in November. For further information contact claire.mcquillan@rcn.org.uk

YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

Just the ticket for student recruitment



The RCN Bus went down a storm when it visited the region for a week-long tour earlier this year.

The specially customised double-decker called in at Leeds Metropolitan University and Hull University as well as Bradford Royal Infirmary, Sheffield Northern General Hospital and Harrogate District Hospital. Students were amazed by the extent of support available to them with many signing up to join the RCN.

ANS Executive Committee Member Damian Ronksley said: "The bus left a lasting impression, with students still talking about it way after it had left. It created a real buzz about the RCN and a number of members decided to become student information officers as a result."

For more information about the RCN Bus and details of where it's going next, visit www.rcn.org.uk/studentbus

EAST MIDLANDS

Seek support in times of trouble

There has been an increase in the number of students seeking support from the RCN about bullying and harassment issues in the East Midlands. Professional Development Officer Jennifer Doohan believes the rise has been caused by students with special educational needs not feeling that they're getting the support they need.

She said: "It's important to recognise when bullying is occurring but not to confuse it with responsive behaviour that is rooted in a lack of understanding of certain needs. I'm always eager to help students so would encourage them to contact me directly for support before launching official complaints."

Inappropriate relationships between nursing students and patients have also been reported in the region. Jennifer recommends referring to the NMC's *Guidance on professional conduct for nursing and midwifery students* and refraining from continuing caring relationships after a placement has ended. She can be contacted directly on jennifer.doohan@rcn.org.uk

WEST MIDLANDS

Qualify and continue to benefit

Nursing students in the West Midlands are being urged to keep their details up to date once they qualify. As a region with among the largest number of student nurse places, thousands are due to finish their course and go on to work later this year. But it's important to inform the RCN of any change of address so you can continue to benefit from the fantastic range of resources on offer.

RCN Student Co-ordinator Laura King said: "We often find students drop off the RCN radar once they qualify. It can be a busy and stressful time with starting a new job and the challenges that brings. However, there are so many things the RCN can offer newly qualified nurses. We have spent the last year developing resources specifically for them and there is now a new area of the RCN website dedicated to their needs."

Go to www.rcn.org.uk/nqn for further information.

LONDON

Student members make a big impact in Bournemouth

Nursing students from the RCN London region made a big impression at Congress earlier this year. A number of members received special funding to attend and got their voices heard on debates as diverse as the early sexualisation of young girls to busting the myth on NHS pensions.

Some students received sponsorship from RCN forums to go along. ANS Executive Committee Member Lisa Osinibi thinks membership of such specialist networks is a great way to learn and develop professionally.

She said: "You can join up to three forums free of charge and there is so much to gain from chatting to qualified nurses who work in areas that interest you. The RCN Discussion Zone is also a fantastic tool for exchanging views and getting advice. It can be accessed directly from the RCN website and is the best social network for nursing students around."

Go to www.rcn.org.uk/forums to find out more about RCN forums and join up today.

SOUTH WEST

Go green for a healthy future

Nursing and midwifery students in the South West are being urged to consider more environmentally friendly ways to travel to university or placement. There are a number of schemes operating across the region with some NHS trusts offering great incentives to encourage greener travel.

ANS Executive Committee Member Claire Barber said: "There's been no better time to go green. North Bristol NHS Trust has a range of incentives if you cycle into work, including free meal vouchers, cycling accessories and maintenance workshops. They also operate a car sharing scheme and an intersite bus between Southmead, Frenchay and Blackberry Hill Hospitals. The University of the West of England is pretty good too with plenty of bike parking spaces and information."

NORTH WEST

Representing students across the region



A new student representative has been appointed to sit on the RCN North West Regional Board. David Hopton has

recently taken up post and is keen to get the student voice heard on important issues that affect nurses and future nurses in the area. He joins over 10 other board members whose role it is to advance the work of the RCN in the North West in line with the main aims and objectives of the College.

ANS Executive Committee Member Joy Griffiths is also keen to recruit a student member for each of the RCN branches in the North West. She believes this will help raise the profile of student issues across the region and better inform the RCN about the needs of nursing students locally. If you would like to get involved email joy.rcnstudents@hotmail.co.uk

NORTHERN

To research or not to research

Nursing students from across the region gathered for the final day of the RCN's International Nursing Research Conference in Gateshead recently. On a day arranged especially for them, those present debated whether undergraduate nurses should undertake empirical research as part of their studies. With strong feelings and mixed views in the room, it was clear that there would be no easy solution to the debate.

In the afternoon, students took part in practical seminars on research issues such as understanding advanced nursing practice and pain management. ANS

Executive Committee Member Paul Young said: "It's been useful to find out about new techniques for research and how you can use results to enhance your nursing."

Next year's research conference will be held between 16 and 18 May in Harrogate. For more details, go to www.rcn.org.uk/events nearer the time.

SOUTH EAST

Representing your needs

Jayne Parker is the new ANS Executive Committee Member for the South East. She took on the role in April after the position was vacant for some months. It means members in the region now have a dedicated person at the RCN to represent their needs at a national level.

Jayne said: "I'm looking forward to learning more about our members in the South East and helping them in any way that I can. I have always been interested in trade union issues and am excited by the prospect of both representing fellow students and pushing the profession forward."

Jayne's photo and contact details can be found in the column on the right.

WALES

Get involved and influence

Nursing and midwifery students are being urged to express their views on what health issues the next Welsh Assembly Government should make a priority. The RCN is currently planning its campaigning work ahead of the elections to the National Assembly next year and is asking for your help to shape its manifesto content. The elections could have a major impact on the provision of your training and day-to-day work when you enter the profession. So make sure you have a voice and use it to influence. Contact lisa.turnbull@rcn.org.uk to get involved.

EASTERN

Students make their mark

Nursing students from across the region met with RCN Chief Executive Dr Peter Carter last month at a special meeting of the Suffolk branch. Those in attendance had the opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns about the future of the profession and find out more about getting involved with the RCN.

Four new student information officers (SIOs) have been recruited in the region recently but the RCN is always keen to attract more. A meeting for all current and prospective SIOs is being arranged for July and anyone who would like to find out more about the role should attend. For more details contact Susan Tivy-Ward on ward.sue@gmail.com

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For more information about your ANS Executive Committee members go to www.rcn.org.uk/ans_exec

Reflections

Get voting!



The RCN elections have come round again and never before has it been more vital for you to vote for your representatives.

This year has seen a change of government. Ministers have new ideas about how they want to deliver health care, with savings at the centre. We need to make sure students aren't among those savings.

As we know, the government also has the say on funding for student placements, education, preceptorship, and the good old bursary. These are important issues and you need a representative who will deliver the voice of students right across the RCN.

I have been very fortunate over my three years as an RCN student representative as I had a strong and informed committee to support my work on Council. Now, as I prepare to move on, I would urge everyone to read the election statements from all candidates and make up your mind about who will be the best to voice your opinions and influence the decision-making for student nurses across the UK at such a vital time. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/elections to find out more.

It has been a privilege to serve students on the ANS Executive Committee and a great honour to be your Chair. I would like to wish the successful candidates the very best of luck in their terms of office. And to the rest of you...get voting!

Harvey Morgan is the student member of RCN Council and Chair of the ANS

Finding my voice



I've been to RCN Congress for the past three years but never had the courage to speak in debates. This year I decided it would be different. I had voting rights on behalf of my branch and figured there was no better time to get my voice heard.

The first debate I felt passionate about was on protecting NHS pensions. I knew a bit about the issues and decided this would be my debating debut. I pressed the button and waited for my name to appear in the queue of speakers.

Up it popped and my heart went crazy. As I stepped up to the lectern I was almost frantic with nerves. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to get my words out and the adrenaline kicking in scrambled my

brain a bit. I had to force myself to take deep breaths and that seemed to help.

Afterwards, I felt proud of myself for overcoming my fears and having the courage to do it. I also got really positive feedback and encouragement from experienced Congress speakers so that boosted my confidence and spurred me on to try it again.

Following that, I didn't look back and got up to speak in a number of debates. I would definitely recommend it to others. It is a whole new experience and can really help build your confidence.

Andy Shum is a third year nursing student at the University of Greenwich in London.

In the spotlight



As part of my student representative role at Congress, I was asked to meet and greet the Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg. Although I had met key political figures in the past, this was the first time it was my sole responsibility to

make the first impression. The pressure was really on and I was keen to make sure I didn't let my fellow students down.

As the time grew closer to meeting the man himself, I became consumed by nerves. Journalists and photographers were everywhere and I knew that as soon as Nick Clegg appeared they would be ready to pounce, eager to get that all important image of him, and me, as he arrived at Congress.

I needn't have worried. The party leader was incredibly down to earth. As soon as we spoke I felt much more at ease. He asked about the situation for nursing students in Northern Ireland and listened intently as I told him about the desperate lack of jobs for newly qualified nurses.

It was a great honour to have such political influence on behalf of the RCN. Earlier on in Congress week, student member of RCN Council Saffron Brown met with the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and later ANS Executive Committee Member for Scotland Karen Winchcombe spent time with the then Shadow Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley.

Make sure that you're part of the action next year. Come to Congress in Liverpool between 10 and 14 April.

Joanne Sharkey is the ANS Executive Committee Member for Northern Ireland.

Advice

Legal pitfalls post-qualification

Many of you will now be preparing to leave university and enter the world of work. But as you take those first steps in your nursing career, it's worth bearing in mind the legal pitfalls that could cause you problems.

The RCN Legal Services department provides representation to members in trouble and often sees cases that could have been avoided. Many of these involve investigations by the NHS counter fraud office on issues over annual leave and sick leave. These can be referred to the Nursing and Midwifery Council and result in cautions that remain on your record, or in serious cases, see you struck off the nursing register.

One recent example involved a nurse who rang in sick for a day shift, but later felt better and went in to work a previously arranged bank shift that evening. She didn't realise this behaviour could be considered fraudulent and faced charges of dishonestly calling in sick. She was represented by the RCN and received a one year caution order.

Another similar example saw a nurse being struck off. She faced four charges of working bank shifts while on sick leave, one charge of sleeping while on night duty and one charge of providing misleading employment details. She had no representation in her case and will not be allowed to nurse again.

RCN Senior Legal Officer Roz Hooper said: "My best advice is to make sure you don't do anything that could open you up to scrutiny. If you feel so ill that you've rung in sick then consider yourself signed off and don't do anything else. Make sure your CV is watertight and don't embellish details. If you say a reference has come from a manager then that must be the case. Genuine mistakes can be defended but dishonesty can cause real trouble."

If you need legal advice, contact RCN Direct in the first instance, on 0345 772 6100.

Welfare advice in times of trouble

The RCN Welfare Rights and Guidance team receives various requests for help from student members. Below is a question that was raised recently.

Question:

I am a final year nursing student and am looking forward to starting my first full time nursing job when I qualify later this summer. However, I have been told by my personal tutor that it is unlikely that I will be able to start any full time nursing job until October, which is when I can expect to be fully registered. My last bursary payment is in June. How am I going to cope financially until October? I am a single student and have rent to pay.

Answer:

This is a potential concern for many students qualifying in the summer. The administration associated with registering immediately after completing a course can be quite frustrating.

It may be possible for you to do some agency work as a health care assistant while you are waiting to get your NMC registration through.

However, if you are struggling to find any form of temporary work, then you can apply for Job Seekers Allowance while waiting to start work and after the official end of term.

If you have not paid National Insurance contributions during your time at university you can still claim income-based Job Seekers Allowance. As you are a single student, you can also claim for any council tax and rent that you have liability for (subject to regional rent caps).

You will need to contact the Department for Work and Pensions to arrange a job seekers interview, and I would suggest that you get a letter from your university confirming the official last date of your course.

If you experience any problems with your application for assistance, or would like to speak to the RCN Careers Adviser about your next steps post-qualification, then please call the RCN Welfare Rights and Guidance Service on 0345 408 4391.

Setting up a placement overseas

Opportunities to undertake elective placements overseas as part of nurse training are now widely available. However, many students don't know where to start in making plans.

The RCN International Team can help. They have a factsheet especially for students who want to set up an elective placement abroad. It points out the major factors that need considering and gives some sources of further information and advice. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/nursing/workingabroad/general_information_sheets to download it for free.

The RCN's International Humanitarian Community might also be a good source of support. This is an online network which brings together health care practitioners who have worked in, are currently working in, or are interested in working in the field of international humanitarian health care work. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/int_humanitarian_community_to_join_the_network

If you want to find out more, you might want to consider attending a conference on 10 September at RCN Headquarters in London. This event, entitled *Working overseas: changing lives*, aims to provide a platform to discuss global trends in the provision of health care and explore options for gaining experience abroad. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/forthcoming_events to find out more.

For further information contact the RCN International Team on 0207 647 3597 or email international@rcn.org.uk



Royal College
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