

ALL YOU
NEED TO
KNOW ABOUT
CONGRESS 2010

The magazine for RCNSTUDENTS

spring 2010

the answer

Nursing research
What does it take
to make it sexy?

Mental health

Helping homeless
people in need

Men in nursing
How can we
attract more?



Royal College
of Nursing

CARING TOGETHER

RCN Congress & Exhibition 2010



CARING TOGETHER at Congress 2010

RCN Congress is the biggest nursing conference in the UK with over 4,000 members of the nursing family attending each year. It's an opportunity to hear lively debates on nursing issues, attend fringe events to enhance your knowledge, visit the huge exhibition, and network with like-minded people who feel as passionate about nursing as you do.

This year RCN Congress is being held in Bournemouth between 25 and 29 April with Students' Day on 27 April. The event will be split between the Bournemouth International Centre and the Pavilion which is just along the road.

What can I expect at Students' Day?

Students' Day is one of the most important events in the student calendar. It includes an afternoon packed full of presentations from key nursing figures and plenty of time for you to visit the exhibition hall crammed with potential future employers and influencers of your career. You'll also have the chance to attend fringe events or watch a debate in the main hall, as well as mingle with nurses from a whole range of nursing specialties.

The RCN's dedicated student team will be on hand to answer all your questions and you can let your hair down at the free dinner and party when the conference draws to a close. With all this and more on offer at Students' Day 2010 can you afford not to be there?

Win a free place to attend Congress 2010

The RCN is running a competition to fund five student members to attend Congress 2010. Each winner will be funded from Sunday to Wednesday with all travel and accommodation included. Winners will also be buddied up with a member of the Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee and be offered the opportunity to vote alongside them.

To be in with a chance to win just follow the relevant link from the Students' Day webpage (www.rcn.org.uk/studentsday2010), verify your membership number and contact details and you could be there.

Want to find out more?

Keep up with all the latest developments about Congress 2010 as well as viewing the full programme for Students' Day on the RCN website. Go to www.rcn.org.uk/studentsday2010.



Editorial



The start of a new year and a new decade is an opportunity for all of us to look to the future and see what paths our lives and careers are taking. Many of us will be working hard on assignments, essays and examination preparation, and for those of you in the last few months before qualifying, you'll be looking forward to getting out there and being the independent practitioner you have spent three years training to be.

As we look forward within the Royal College of Nursing we have many things on the horizon in the next year; the completion of the Preceptorship Review, the Prime Minister's Commission report, the results of the Department of Health student support consultation and, most importantly of all, RCN Congress 2010. This year the event takes place in Bournemouth in April and our focus will firmly be on Students' Day. There is much planned to excite and inspire you on the day itself with more details of what is going on and how to attend on the page opposite.

Within this issue of *the answer* you will find regular updates from the Royal College of Nursing's Association of Nursing Students (ANS) plus news that is affecting your education, nursing practice and placements.

Our feature articles also include an insight into the world of mental health nursing in the homeless community; a reflective piece exploring how to deal with a placement you weren't expecting; and a poignant article discussing the importance of our role in the grieving process – something we can all relate to.

As always, this issue of *the answer* would not have been possible without the written submissions of ANS members up and down the UK. We're always keen to hear what students are up to and receive your contributions towards future issues. So if you'd like to put pen to paper and see your name in print email ans@rcn.org.uk.

I hope you enjoy this issue and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at Congress 2010.

Stuart Young
Consultant Editor

Contents

- 4-5 **News**
- 6 **Get involved**
- 7 **Student image**
- 8 **Mental health**
- 9 **Nursing research**
- 10 **Men in nursing**
- 11 **UK nurse**
- 12-13 **News from your area**
- 14 **Helping you**
- 15 **Your thoughts**



the answer

Editor:
Kimberley Bell
Production:
Mark Kalaher
Designer:
Dekko Advertising
& Design
Published by:
Royal College
of Nursing,
20 Cavendish Square
London W1G 0RN
T: 020 7409 3333
W: www.rcn.org.uk
E: theanswer@rcn.org.uk

Editorial Advisory Board

Consultant Editor:
Stuart Young
Saffron Brown
Claire Evans
Joy Griffiths
Alex Thompson
Susan Tivy-Ward
Paul Young
RCN Student Advisers:
Gill Robertson
Adele Bird
RCN Student Coordinator:
Laura King

Be a safe surfer

The RCN has issued new advice on how to use the internet safely. The legal guidance reminds nursing students that actions taken at home on the internet could potentially leave them in breach of the law on defamation and harassment, as well as their university's policy on internet use.

According to the guidance, you should not post damaging remarks about the organisation where you're on placement, patients or your fellow nursing students. This kind of use of internet sites could breach your university's internet policy, harassment policy or harm the reputation of the organisation where you're on placement.

Social network sites in particular raise concerns about privacy, according to the guidance. With links to other people's pages commonplace, the RCN advises that nursing students should be very careful about the information they post online.

The guidance, entitled *Legal advice on using the internet*, includes a list of do's and don'ts about using IT and can be accessed online at www.rcn.org.uk/publications

Keep your eyes peeled... big changes ahead

The outcomes of three major consultations on issues affecting nursing students are due out soon. The Prime Minister's Commission on the Future of Nursing and Midwifery is likely to report findings in March and the results of the Department of Health's (DH) consultation on student support are also expected. Also due to be released soon are recommendations from the consultation on a preceptorship framework. All three consultations relate to England only but are likely to have an impact elsewhere.

RCN student members have been actively involved with all consultations and have fed their thoughts back jointly, via workshops hosted by the RCN, and individually via recommended online channels. The RCN is committed to supporting your studies and representing your rights, as well as keeping you informed of all the latest developments.

Thanks to all those who contributed to the consultations. Now keep an eye on the student pages of the RCN website for news and advice on all of the above: www.rcn.org.uk/students

RCN students welcome NMC guidance

RCN students have welcomed publication of the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC) revised guidance on professional conduct for student nurses and midwives. Members of the RCN's Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee were involved with shaping the guidance and went along to the launch event in October.

The new publication, *Guidance on professional conduct for nursing and midwifery students*, covers key areas such as confidentiality, dignity of patients, alcohol consumption, teamwork and maintaining appropriate sexual boundaries.

ANS Executive Committee Member for the West Midlands Stuart Young said: "The revised guidance is really good. It puts things into perspective and explains very clearly what is expected of nursing students. While it is based on the core principles of the NMC code of conduct, it is much more student-friendly and in simple language. It's useful guidance as opposed to a set of rules."

The NMC does not directly regulate students but its guidance will be used by fitness to practise panels at universities when deciding whether students who have been reported for misconduct should be allowed to continue training and, eventually, to join the NMC's register.

The guidance is available to download from the NMC website: www.nmc.org.uk



Pictured above with NMC Chair Tony Hazell are (left to right) RCN student members Phil Schneider, Sarah Evans, Claire Evans and Stuart Young

Fit for the future

The legal structure of the RCN will change from April following a vote by members at the RCN's Annual General Meeting. More than 23,000 people cast a vote with in excess of 95 per cent in favour of changing the RCN so it is no longer a charity but has a separate charitable foundation established instead.

The change, which involves amending the RCN's Royal Charter, is necessary to comply with the Charity Commission requirement that the objectives of a charity must be charitable. The RCN has one charter objective that is not charitable – its trade union objective.

Subject to Privy Council approval, the RCN can now continue to fulfil its professional and trade union functions, and can apply to the new foundation for grants to fund the activities it carries out that are charitable.

Make nursing count

The RCN has launched its manifesto to all political parties ahead of the forthcoming general election and is urging you to make a difference by using it to influence your local politicians.

The manifesto *Nursing Counts* outlines the issues RCN members believe should be the health priorities for the next UK government. They were drawn up following a thorough consultation process involving RCN members at all levels.

The measures seek to protect the nation's health, develop and support the nursing workforce and improve patient care by placing quality at the centre of all health care provision.

Priorities for all political parties include:

- standing up for staff who speak out – all health care organisations should hold a register of staff concerns
- safer staffing levels – there should be regular staffing reviews to guarantee the highest quality of care
- give nurses the time to train – all health care assistants should be regulated and all health care workers should have protected training time
- protect the nation's health – there should be a single mandatory code to regulate the drinks industry
- improve care for those with long term conditions – every patient with a long-term condition should have guaranteed access to specialist nursing care
- sustain health care investment – maintain current levels of health care spending.

For more information go to:

www.rcn.org.uk/newsevents/government/general_election

You are not alone

The RCN is keen to encourage nursing students to contact its dedicated helpline should they be struggling with the pressures of university life. The reminder comes after the publication of figures obtained by *Nursing Standard* showed more than half of the nursing students on some courses leave before completing their training.

The figures have also prompted the RCN to question the level of support given to nurses at the start of their career. RCN Chief Executive & General Secretary Dr Peter Carter said: "Of course, some people will not be suited to the demands of nursing, but with drop-out rates as high as 78%, something is seriously wrong with the support offered to the nurses of the future. Financial support is very important when students are starting out, but it is not the only kind of support which needs to be on offer."

A recent RCN survey of student nurses suggested that many feel isolated while on their placements, and many did not feel that they were able to ask for help from their universities. Dr Carter added: "With a large proportion of the nursing workforce due to retire, we need to support students to complete their studies and become the highly skilled nurses required by the health service of the future."

Advice and support is available from RCN Direct 365 days a year on 0345 772 6100.

Helping you reach your destination

The RCN Student Bus is nearing the end of its second tour having seen thousands of students step aboard. The bus began its journey in South Wales before going on to visit universities and hospitals in London, the Eastern region, South East, North Wales, West Midlands, East Midlands and finally the South West.

The bus, sponsored by Partnerships in Care, is a fully converted double-decker with seminar room, cyber café and publication area. Its aim is to make the RCN more accessible to nursing students, offering free educational workshops, advice and resources.

Saffron Brown, Student Member of RCN Council, said: "The bus is a fantastic initiative and really shows how important nursing students are to the RCN. It goes out to where we are and enables staff to respond there and then to deliver the services we need."

The RCN Student Team is currently planning the next stages of the RCN Student Bus tour. To find out more go to:

www.rcn.org.uk/development/students/rcn_student_bus



get involved

Make the most of your RCN

The Royal College of Nursing supports your studies, represents your rights and gives you advice. It's the biggest nursing union in the UK for a reason. But are you making the most of all it has to offer?

Nursing students have many reasons for joining the RCN. Some do it to gain access to the large number of learning resources available via the specialist library; others see the tailored career and welfare advice as a benefit; while some want to get involved with campaigning to bring about real improvements in the lives of nurses and nursing students.

Whatever your reason for joining the RCN it's likely that you're not making the most of everything the organisation has to offer. Forums are a fantastic way to network with likeminded people who feel passionate about their specialism and can help you to fulfil your nursing potential.

What are forums?

Forums are groups of RCN members working in a similar nursing speciality or with like interests. Thousands of RCN members throughout the UK use forums to connect with each other, share ideas and achieve real change. Whether leading the way on a steering committee, or keeping up to date with important developments, forum members are at the cutting edge of the work of the RCN. The forums range from specialising in mental health, to diabetes, to defence nursing and beyond. There really is something for everyone.

What can I expect when I join a forum?

How involved you become with the forums is entirely your choice. You can just sit back and make the most of receiving regular newsletters from your chosen forum, you can actively seek out your forums' latest news via their online community, or you can chat about professional issues and seek advice from fellow forum members on the RCN Discussion Zone (see opposite).

What if I want to get more involved?

Each forum has a steering committee whose members are elected for a two-year period by people in the forum. The steering committee works closely alongside the RCN nursing department to set objectives and key areas of work for the year ahead. The forums can then apply for money from the RCN to fund work which will advance

their area of specialism. This might include the development and publication of clinical guidelines, research in a specific area, policy formation or the hosting of a training event. All forum members are invited to contribute to the development of all work undertaken by the steering committee.

If you want to get more involved with the work of your forum or stand for election to the steering committee, look out for updates in the forum newsletters and contact the relevant forum chair, whose details can be found within each newsletter or online. Forum elections are usually held in the spring of each year.

How do I join a forum and how much does it cost?

You can join up to three forums **free of charge** and sign up to more for an annual fee of £15 per forum. Joining couldn't be easier either. Just call RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100 to express your interest or sign up online by going to the MyRCN area of the RCN website.

So what about the Discussion Zone?

The Discussion Zone (or DZ as it's more affectionately known) of the RCN website is a place to chat. But it is also an invaluable resource for sharing information and advice that can make a real difference to your practice. The DZ board is separated into various topics, from general discussion to employment issues to health policy and more. There is also a dedicated area for RCN students to network and discuss issues that are unique to them as well as online discussion boards that relate to each of the 41 forum communities.

So go on, what's stopping you? All you need to do is apply for an online account at the MyRCN area of the website and you could be posting before you know it. Just click on the link to the Discussion Zone in the top right corner of the RCN website, enter your details, and you'll be away.



Setting the record straight

Harvey Morgan discusses the true image of nursing students

There has been a great deal of discussion about the image of nursing and the public perception of the profession in recent times. While this is a welcome debate, and a fantastic opportunity for nurses to sell the role to both patients and potential new recruits, some anecdotes have raised issues of concern for me and fellow student members of the RCN.

I refer in particular to newspaper and magazine articles I have seen that criticise student nurses for being 'too posh to wash' and allege that many are 'drunks' who turn up for placement hung over and unable to perform. Both of these perceptions are unfair to the large majority of committed, hardworking and dedicated nursing students who take pride in their chosen career and strive to become the best nurses they possibly can.

In my experience, most nursing students across the UK would readily roll up their sleeves and engage in the care of patients, regardless of what task is asked of them, contributing significantly to the nursing workforce. And while it may be true that a small percentage of people believe there is little in terms of learning outcomes when addressing personal care or toileting, I believe that many nursing students recognise this to be the nurse's best opportunity to promote privacy and dignity for the patient and to provide a platform for establishing a therapeutic relationship with those in their care.

However, having said this, it should also be acknowledged that the essential side of nursing needs to be balanced with the provision of learning opportunities for students to be involved in other aspects of the role, allowing them to implement their sound theoretical and evidence-based knowledge. This is what I believe makes for a positive practice placement, which does happen up and down the UK, with mentors and staff providing some excellent learning environments.

More worryingly, however, is the portrayed image of nursing students drinking too much and therefore compromising both their learning and patient care. While all members of the nursing family need time to socialise and have respite from both studies and practice, it must be recognised that this is not a big part of the make-up of a student nurse. Reports suggest that student nurses are among the most economically challenged in the student community and it is my experience that most have neither the money nor time to socialise on a regular basis.

I feel that these sweeping statements and over generalisations, seen both in the trade and regular press, are particularly unfair to nursing students when so many have been involved with shaping areas of great importance in nursing over recent months. These include informing and influencing the debate in the review of pre-registration at the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), contributing evidence to the Prime Minister's Commission, helping to shape the NMC student code and being involved with the evaluation of preceptorship.

In conclusion, I feel that promoting a positive image of both nurses and nursing is vital to attract people into the profession and in maintaining the trust of the public. To achieve this, however, we must all work together and pull in the same direction. I have written this article in the hope that you too will be inspired to defend the image of nursing and nursing students.

Harvey Morgan

Student member of RCN Council

Chair of the RCN Association of Nursing Students (ANS) Executive Committee



mental health

Helping homeless people in need

Luc Taperell offers his views on the barriers that prevent homeless people accessing mental health support and asks what more can be done to help this vulnerable group

Last year I had an experience which changed my perceptions of both myself and homelessness forever. I went on placement with a homeless community mental health team in Birmingham and within days was being exposed to more poverty and desperation than I ever thought possible. I found it really quite shocking and it made me question everything I thought to be true about people sleeping rough.

Up until that point I suppose I was quite judgemental about homelessness and the reasons why people might end up living on the streets. I perhaps assumed their fate was sealed by certain life choices they'd made or that their dependence on drugs or alcohol meant they were excluded from temporary accommodation.

The reality was much more sobering. Many of the people I came across had severe mental health needs and were simply not getting the assessment, treatment and support they needed to turn their lives around. Some were rejected from hostels because their behaviour didn't conform to entrance criteria and others got pushed away because there weren't enough staff to meet their needs.

Issues overlooked

In my experience the council system prioritises homelessness to the point where mental health needs can initially be overlooked. This is short-sighted though because I don't believe one issue can be fully resolved without the other.

Without a full assessment of the holistic needs of rough sleepers, it's difficult to know whether becoming homeless triggers mental health issues or whether it's the other way around. Did becoming homeless cause the mental health condition or did the experience of being homeless exacerbate previous feelings and thoughts?

In Birmingham there appears to be limited support for homeless people at night, particularly if that person has a mental health need. The council's outreach team

goes out twice a week to provide hot drinks and blankets but entrance to hostels closes relatively early and specific support for the mentally ill can only be provided by referral to the small homeless community mental health team. It means that even if a rough sleeper is found by the outreach team to be in serious need of mental health support late at night, there is nowhere for them to go.

No room at the inn

One of the biggest problems, I believe, is the lack of basic mental health training or resources to help people with mental health issues in hostels. Most hostels have entry criteria that must be met before accommodation is granted and some hostels seem to make themselves

early relapse signs and without the correct support, people are at an increased risk of continual homelessness.

In Birmingham there are no especially reserved hostel places for people with mental health problems and the only centre that once provided accommodation for people in need of constant monitoring was closed down several years ago due to problems with planning consent.

In an ideal world

I believe that to offer some resolution to this controversial situation, the city needs at least one accommodation building that supports people who have severe and ongoing mental health issues. More intense and effective monitoring could then be

provided and staff could be given training in mental health awareness and services to help benefit the service user. My vision would be to have CCTV cameras on entry locations, staffing 24 hours per day, and access to visiting support agencies like the citizens' advice bureaux.

Ideally, referral would be made by the homeless community mental health team and the hostel would have drug monitoring to ensure it was a substance-free zone. In many ways I see it as being similar to a hospital setting but without the need for this formal route of intervention.

Until this happens, I dread to think how many people

with mental health needs are left living on the streets, desperate and excluded from the current system and given no real support to overcome their problems.



unavailable, via their criteria, to people who are deemed to have serious behavioural problems.

The trouble is, without sufficient training, mental health issues can easily be confused with disruptive conduct, leaving people exempt from help. Or worse, people with identified mental health problems are turned away because hostels feel they don't have enough staff available to meet their support needs. This can lead to relevant agencies not being informed of

Luc Taperell is now a qualified mental health nurse. He carried out his placement while training at Birmingham City University and would like to thank the homeless community mental health team without whom his research would not have been possible. The views expressed are his own.

What does it take to make research sexy?

Annie Topping, Professor of Nursing at the University of Huddersfield, presents a convincing argument about why nursing research should excite and inspire you

A few months ago I was teaching a group of second-year child-branch students. The session was titled 'evidence-based practice'. I had not met the students before but I sensed on arrival in the classroom, memory stick in hand, that they did not anticipate a particularly scintillating session. As a firm believer that research is exciting, but acutely aware my passion is not always shared by others, I knew I had to capture their attention.

I came rapidly to the realisation that my planned PowerPoint presentation was unlikely to do more than convince them that I was of the boring tendency and consequently so was research. So I resolutely decided to throw caution to the wind and ad lib the session. I saw my task as not just being to demonstrate that research is every nurse's business but more than that, it's exciting.

What the textbooks say

Go to any dictionary or research textbook and you'll find a definition which suggests that the primary aim of research is to derive new knowledge through the use of robust, transparent methods. In a discipline like nursing, the primary intention is to derive new knowledge so that we can practise nursing better and improve outcomes for patients, carers and families.

But one of the problems with research is that it's shrouded in terminology which to the uninitiated is more akin to a foreign language. This is true whether you're trying to make sense of research reports, embarking on the research journey for the first time or trying to bring about evidence-based change in practice. Once you've acquired the language, however, even if it is just a limited vocabulary, a world opens up and the joy of research can be appreciated.

First experiences

I was first introduced to research when studying for a degree in nursing after I qualified. I can remember being asked to do a critical appraisal of a report and judge whether the findings should be adopted in practice. What I recollect thinking is that the report sounded really authoritative and that it must be good because it had been published. But once I started to read the report closely I began to see all the flaws and limitations it had. The experience taught me a valid lesson and made me realise one of the first rules of research scepticism – nothing should be taken for granted and everything is intriguing.

Research in reality

Later, as part of the course, I did my first research project: a qualitative study exploring the body image and sexuality concerns of patients who had an ostomy formed as a consequence of cancer surgery. From listening, really listening, to patients about their experiences I learnt how to nurse better. I was at the time a clinical

nurse specialist but discovered more about the patient experience from those accounts and, importantly, undertaking the analysis than I had from doing the job alone. The opportunity to give full attention to those individual stories and make sense of them produced a much richer knowing. Doing research allowed me to render my normal practice strange and in doing so I saw it through fresh eyes. That knowing then became translated into my work and hopefully to the benefit of patients.

Lasting lessons

Returning to the students who instead of the prepared session were exposed to the ramblings of a researcher, what did they gain? Well, I hope they took away three messages. Research is about being in a state of ever questioning. It is a journey of discovery and one that requires clear vision. And lastly, it is through research evidence that we will improve our practice and outcomes for those who receive our care. So isn't that essential – and definitely sexy?



Annie Topping is making a presentation about nursing research on Students' Day of RCN Congress. For more details see the front inside cover or go to www.rcn.org.uk/studentsday2010

Men of Britain: nursing needs you!

Despite an anticipated shortfall of future nurses, the profession still fails to attract adequate numbers of men. Laura Aylett asks why nursing is still considered a 'female career' and what should be done to combat the stereotype

The nursing profession has come a long way from the days when nurses were considered selfless 'angels' but one part of the stereotype just won't seem to go away. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the RCN first admitting men into its membership, yet nursing is still a career dominated by women. Only 10 per cent of all registered nurses are male, which is why the RCN's student executive team have made promoting nursing to men one of their priorities.

"Patients are always asking me why I chose to become a nurse," says Stuart Young, a nursing student at Birmingham City University. "It's

as if they can't understand why I would make that choice. But why shouldn't men want to enter a caring profession? And why is it that women are automatically deemed more capable of doing a caring job?"

It's not as if male nurses are a new idea; men have been employed to give nursing care since Roman times. During the Middle Ages, monastic orders were the

main health care providers in Europe. It was Florence Nightingale's pioneering work of the 19th century that changed people's perceptions. Nursing was now considered to be an expression of purely feminine virtues.

But while men were always well represented in mental health and military nursing (where their physical strength was thought necessary), male general nurses were looked at with suspicion by matrons in the early 20th century. They were even kept on a separate register.

The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal for male nurses to be treated differently, and they were allowed to become midwives for the first time. But for male nurses working today, patients' perceptions seem to be the main barrier to equality. Paul Young, a second year adult nursing student at Northumbria University, has found that some female patients are reluctant to be treated by him.

"I think privacy and dignity are the key issues when it comes to being a male nurse," he says. "You have to be so much more conscious of things because of your sex. But often when people are in need, they just want help regardless of whether that comes from a man or a woman."

By having so few male nurses, the profession also misses out on the unique perspective and skills that they bring. Male patients may feel more comfortable having a male nurse perform intimate procedures on them, or find it easier to discuss sexual health matters with someone they relate to.

"Maybe if more men were visible within nursing then health care would seem accessible to men and more would take a proactive approach to improving their health," Paul says. "I don't think it's a coincidence that men are reluctant to go to the doctor."

An increase in male recruitment would certainly help the national nursing shortage, but perhaps it is more important to consider the personal effect it would have. Stuart says: "I started nurse training because I wanted to make a difference and I enjoy what I do. Nothing is more rewarding than helping a patient get well. For me that's true no matter what sex you are."

If public misconceptions about the diversity of the nursing profession don't change, many men who would make great nurses may never even consider the career, even though it could give them much satisfaction.

Pictured: Jake Williams, first year nursing student

Virtually the same?

Liz Capron reflects on the benefits and pitfalls of being offered a virtual placement



Last year, during the first year of my adult nursing course, I had some fantastic placements that enabled me to become familiar with a wide range of nursing environments and differing care settings. In all my placements, I have felt supported in developing my nursing skills and applying clinical theory to practice. Every placement has presented very different learning opportunities, but it was my non-branch ‘virtual’ mental health placement that was particularly unique.

Owing to the increase in the number of student nurses and limited placement availability in some areas, certain universities are experiencing difficulty in the provision of clinical placements. Within my trust, a severe shortage of clinical placements within mental health care provision caused a number of students to be provided with a ‘virtual placement’.

First impressions

The day the brown envelope drops on my doormat with my next placement details is always really exciting and quite nerve-wracking. When I received my mental health placement information and read ‘virtual placement’ I felt really gutted that I was going on some sort of strange placement that was not going to involve anything ‘real’. I didn’t even know what a virtual placement was, but I can remember not being too impressed, and after giving my friends a ring, realised that I wasn’t the only one preparing for a four-week virtual experience.

When it finally came to the placement, I realised that it was not going to be like any placement I’d had, heard of, or even read about before. What followed were four weeks of structured teaching sessions on everything from the history of mental health to information on available mental health services and campaigns at local and national level. Our time was spent learning through a combination of lectures, group discussions and service user-led sessions, designed to challenge assumptions about mental illness and encourage reflection of our own attitudes and behaviours around mental health issues.

Pros and cons

Having the opportunity to talk directly with service users and carers about their experience of mental illness and mental health services was, without question, invaluable. However, this was at the expense of any clinical experience. Four weeks of self-directed study and

structured learning definitely provided the environment for students to learn a massive amount about mental health and, for some, did really alter their assumptions about mental illness. But for me, I have always felt very positive about mental health and didn’t really consider a mental health placement to involve only the challenging of attitudes. We did have the opportunity to visit one of three high-secure hospitals in England for a day, but I really felt I missed out on working in a mental health environment that would enrich my understanding of mental health care services.

For all its limitations, the virtual placement was a great learning experience. I was able to learn about the complexities of mental health problems and mental health care, meeting service users at various stages in their treatment who disclosed information that on a ‘real’ placement might not have happened.

Something missing

But the uncertainty of whether a patient wants to disclose information as you develop a rapport and relationship with them, for me is one of the fantastic, unique parts of being a nurse. The opportunity to develop a relationship with patients and their families, enabling them to feel they trust you with their care is one of the main reasons I wanted to become a nurse. Being able to use appropriate communication skills and learning from other staff about the best ways to communicate with certain groups of patients is also invaluable, and with the virtual placement, this was unfortunately absent.

With limitations on clinical placements on the increase, I expect more students will be placed ‘virtually’, particularly in specialist areas. These placements, as with mine, present a unique way of learning and without a doubt, I learnt more about mental health than many other students in my cohort who did not have the same opportunity. However, for virtual placements to work effectively, they must incorporate the ability to work with service users in the care environment to maximise learning opportunities.

Final thoughts

If you get the opportunity to go ‘virtual’, go for it – but remember to direct your learning. Investigate whether you can arrange your own insight visits, but, importantly, see it as a unique, positive experience that can develop your skills in an alternative way ready for when your care becomes far from virtual.

Liz Capron is a second year adult nursing student at the University of Nottingham.

The Royal College of Nursing believes that all clinical placements should involve working alongside patients and mentors on a full-time basis. However, as can be seen here, there is an onus on all students to make the most of their placements. For further advice and guidance see the RCN publication *Helping students get the best from their practice placements – an RCN toolkit* which is available for download via the RCN website: www.rcn.org.uk/publications

news from your area

News from your area

SCOTLAND

Help get the nursing voice heard

Nursing students are being urged to express their views on what health issues the next Scottish Parliament should make a priority. The RCN is holding a free conference later this month to get feedback from members on what key matters it should campaign on.

The next elections to the Scottish Parliament are taking place in May 2011. These elections will decide who will become the next Scottish Government and could have a major impact on the provision of your training and your day-to-day work when you enter the profession.

The conference will be held in Glasgow on 23 February and will debate the issues members said were important to them in a recent survey. The views of nursing students are particularly important because you are the future.

For more information go to www.rcn.org.uk/scotland/2011elections or call 0131 6626173. If you can't attend but would still like to get involved contact Elinor Jayne via email: elinor.jayne@rcn.org.uk

EAST MIDLANDS

New student representative for RCN regional Board

A new student representative has been appointed to sit on the RCN East Midlands regional Board. Julia Ibbotson replaces Phil Schneider in the post and is keen to get the student voice heard on important issues that affect nurses and future nurses in the area. She joins over 20 other board members whose role it is to advance the work of the RCN in the East Midlands in line with the main aims and objectives of the College.

Board chair Gill Cort said: "I'm very pleased to welcome Julia to the Board and look forward to her contributing to the work of the RCN in the region. Her presence will enrich the wealth of experience and knowledge that the Board can call upon from among its members."

Julia can be contacted via email: ibbitson1@yahoo.co.uk

NORTH WEST

Nursing student receives special honour for outstanding care

RCN student member Danika Fyles has been given a special award by the Mayor of Bury in recognition of her outstanding care of sick children. Danika is training to become a paediatric nurse and has already made a big impact on placements at two hospitals in the area.

At Fairfield General Hospital, one parent was so impressed with the care Danika provided that she wrote a special letter of thanks to the 19-year-old nursing student. On a further placement at the Royal Bolton Hospital, Danika also cared for a very ill four-year-old boy who was restricted to bed and a wheelchair. She bonded so well with him that his parents asked her to become a part-time carer in their home.

WALES

RCN Student Bus proves popular in South Wales



The first week of the RCN Student Bus tour saw nearly 1000 students hop aboard from locations across South Wales.

That's the busiest week the bus had during its initial leg of the tour which ran between early November and December last year.

The first stop was at Whitchurch Hospital in Cardiff before the bus was officially launched the following day at the University of Glamorgan, where an astonishing 420 students visited.

ANS Executive Committee Member for Wales Claire Evans said: "The bus proved massively popular in South Wales and was a really good advertisement for all the RCN has to offer. It truly highlighted the benefits of becoming a member and lots of students who hadn't considered joining before were keen to sign up."

NORTHERN

Students influence nurse leaders at national summit

RCN Student Council Member Saffron Brown attended the Chief Nursing Officer's summit in the North East in November. The three-day event attracted nursing directors from across the country and Saffron was invited to speak about the future of nursing as part of a panel discussion. The panel comprised nurses from all branches and stages in their career as well as two students and a midwife.

Saffron said: "Being invited to such a prestigious event gave me an insight into the discussions that take place in an otherwise unknown forum. The nurse directors were all very welcoming, approachable and pleased that there were two students participating in the event."

WEST MIDLANDS

Lunch and learning for students in the West Midlands

The RCN is hosting a number of 'lunch and learn' sessions for nursing students in the coming weeks. The one-hour sessions are targeted towards members in their second and third years of training and will be an informal opportunity to learn more about the RCN. They will also provide training on how best to prepare for life post-qualification as well as having a practical focus on topics such as fitness to practise, drug calculations and interview techniques. Look out for details in *RCN Bulletin* and around campus. For more information go to www.rcn.org.uk/westmidlands_events or call the RCN Birmingham office on 0121 454 6475.

LONDON

Capital's students focus on nutrition

London's student information officers are hosting an educational event about the importance of nutrition in providing good nursing care. The seminar will be relevant to all disciplines and will focus on recognising the key signs of detecting malnourishment in patients. A good level of sustenance is shown to be vital to helping patients recover. The event will be held at RCN headquarters in Cavendish Square on 12 April and will cost £5 with lunch included. For more information and booking enquiries contact Laura King by email: laura.king@rcn.org.uk

SOUTH WEST

Make the most of RCN development training



Nursing students in the South West are being encouraged to make the most of their RCN membership by

attending workshops advertised for health care assistants (HCAs). HCA conferences have been hugely successful in the region so far and many more are planned for this year. The conferences focus on issues of accountability, confidence in practice and the impact of the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). Many are free to attend or incur a minimal cost. Plans are underway to hold workshops in Gloucester, Dorset and Bristol in the coming months. For more information and to see a list of all the upcoming educational events in the South West go to

www.rcn.org.uk/southwest_events

EASTERN

Nurse buddy system helps new students on their way

A new buddy system introduced at Anglia University has proved a big hit with students starting their adult nurse training. The scheme partners experienced nursing students with new starters (at the Chelmsford, Fulbourn and Peterborough sites) and aims to provide support and advice to help improve the student experience and attrition rates. RCN member and volunteer buddy Rachel Townsend reckons the system has been highly effective for inspiring confidence in people fresh to the profession.

She said: "It's easy to feel lost and unsure of yourself when you first start something new so being there when the new students might be faltering has been rewarding for me and reassuring for them."

YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

Human rights and health care

RCN students are encouraged to attend a seminar about human rights and health care next month. The workshop on March 23 will cover the law as it relates to human rights and give you guidance on how to use this to protect patient safety as well as your rights as a future employee. For more information go to www.rcn.org.uk/y_and_h/equality_and_diversity_seminars

NORTHERN IRELAND

Learn more about the RCN

The new ANS Executive Committee Member for Northern Ireland, Joanne Sharkey, is keen to spread the word about the benefits of getting more involved with the RCN. Joanne is among only seven student information officers (SIOs) in Northern Ireland and wants to recruit more. She said: "Becoming actively involved in the RCN really opens your eyes to all the latest developments in health policy and clinical practice. I love the fact that you can get your voice heard, via the RCN, on key issues that will affect nurses for many years to come. I would definitely recommend becoming an SIO. It broadens your horizons and is very attractive to future employers."

The RCN is currently looking for a second representative for Northern Ireland to sit on the ANS Executive Committee. If you're interested in standing for election or would like to find out more contact Laura King via email: laura.king@rcn.org.uk

SOUTH EAST

Representing the isles



The first ever student information officer (SIO) for Guernsey has signed up to represent the island. Jake Williams is in his first

year of nurse training and is keen to get the voice of the island's nursing students heard. The health care system in Guernsey is run very differently from that in mainland UK. Nurses are trained in the same way but there is no NHS and residents must join a compulsory health insurance scheme.

Jake said: "I became an SIO because I feel it's important for nursing students here to have the support of their union and for the RCN to know the real issues that affect students on the island. I'm looking forward to representing Guernsey and getting more involved with the RCN."

William Hayes and Samara Lamb are SIOs on the Isle of Wight but there are currently no SIOs in Jersey. If you're interested in becoming an SIO or would like to find out more go to www.rcn.org.uk/development/students/getinvolved

The RCN is currently looking for a second representative for the South East to sit on the ANS Executive Committee. If you're interested in standing for election or would like to find out more contact Laura King via email: laura.king@rcn.org.uk

Your ANS Executive Committee



Harvey Morgan

Student Member of Council

harvey.morgan@rcn.org.uk



Saffron Brown

Student Member of Council

saffron.brown@rcn.org.uk



Claire Evans

Wales

evansclaire84@hotmail.com



Susan Doyle

Wales

hsu6f1@bangor.ac.uk



Karen Winchcombe

Scotland

karensmob@supanet.com



Alex Thompson

Scotland

alex.rcn@googlemail.com



Joanne Sharkey

Northern Ireland

joannepancakes@hotmail.com



Joy Griffiths

North West

joy.rcnstudents@hotmail.co.uk



Paul Young

Northern

paulyoung76@hotmail.com



Damian Ronsley

Yorkshire & The Humber

ans_yorks-humber@hotmail.co.uk



Stuart Young

West Midlands

stuart.young@students.bcu.ac.uk



Philip Schneider

East Midlands

philip_schneider@hotmail.co.uk



Susan Tivy-Ward

Eastern

ward.sue@gmail.com



Claire Barber

South West

claire2.barber@live.uwe.ac.uk



Elizabeth Osinibi

London

olorioba1@yahoo.co.uk

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

Advice

Cast your eyes over ISA guidelines

Nursing students are advised to familiarise themselves with the regulations of the new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) and get to know what sort of behaviour is required.

The ISA vetting and barring scheme has been set up to regulate anyone who works with children and vulnerable adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and all newly qualified nurses will need to be registered from November, although they can join from July.

What's important to remember is that anyone barred from the register will not be able to work with children and vulnerable adults for a minimum of 10 years – which could end a new nurse's career before it has even started.

However, the sorts of behaviour the ISA says could result in a ban are open to interpretation and include things such as:

- causing mental anguish by denying privacy, creating inflexible regimes or a lack of choice
- physical contact resulting in discomfort, pain or injury including not treating sores, or the under or overuse of medication
- neglect like not treating weight loss, not changing soiled clothes and insufficient food and drink
- using demeaning language or using excessive or unwanted familiarity.

While the RCN is keen to encourage appropriate regulation, it has concerns about the lack of clarification on some of the ISA's regulations and the apparent lack of a fair procedure for health care workers who face being barred. Alongside other unions, it is lobbying the Government for improvement on these issues and is working hard to help nursing staff who find themselves in difficulty.

If you receive any worrying correspondence from the ISA, you're advised to contact your RCN office immediately.

There are tight time limits associated with the scheme, with just eight weeks to make a representation. If the RCN needs to progress a case, considerable information needs to be collected.

For further information about the ISA scheme go to www.isa.gov.org.uk

Caring in the community

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

Question:

I am a third year student in adult nursing. I really love community nursing and don't particularly want to work in a hospital when I qualify, although some nurses have advised me to do so. Do you have any advice?

Answer:

The most important factor in your first job is being given the support and mentorship required to help make the transition from student to registered nurse. Many primary care settings are keen to offer support to newly qualified nurses.

Ideally you should apply for posts offering at least six months preceptorship, which includes assessment of staff nurse competencies. If a position is not immediately available in the community, six months to one year in an acute setting will help you gain transferable skills.

Competencies in areas including administration of medicine, assessment, problem solving, teamwork, leadership, teaching, managing long-term conditions and wound care would be useful for a future move to the community.

The RCN Welfare Rights and Guidance Service is available on 0345 408 4391. Help lines are open from 9.30am until 4.30pm, Monday to Friday.

My words of wisdom on changing branch speciality

By RCN student information officer
Katy Lowe

I decided to change branch specialties, from adult to mental health, after my experience of a cross-branch placement in the first year of training. I really enjoyed my adult nurse training but something about working in a mental health setting really inspired me. It was more what I expected nursing to be. I could spend more time with patients and it seemed less prescriptive than general nursing.

I discussed it with my tutor and drew up a pro and con list which came out on the side of adult nursing. But during the first week of my second year, I realised my feelings for mental health nursing hadn't changed so I decided to transfer to the mental health branch at that late stage. Fortunately, my local mental health trust had a vacancy and I was offered a place on the mental health course.

I still had reservations, but my fears were quashed when I started the course and went on placement. I have no regrets and am pleased to have experience in general nursing. From what I've been through, I would offer this advice to anyone else thinking about changing branches:

- do it for the right reasons – don't do it because you think the branch you are moving to is easier – it won't be
- ask yourself whether you have the different skills you will need
- talk to lecturers and tutors – they offer advice and will help with the process
- go with your heart.

Reflections

The posh tea set

Jayne Steer describes the moment she first experienced the death of a child patient, when time seemed to stop and actions spoke louder than words

There is something about the posh tea tray; it is a silent indicator to those who know. I have not experienced death very often during my paediatric training, but I am aware of the symbolism of the matching tea service. While staff drink from chipped cups, freebies from drugs reps stained black from another strong coffee on a night shift and a lip-service rinse under the tap, the matching tea service sits in the cupboard, beautiful and clean, waiting to be aired.

The first time I realised what the tea tray was for I questioned why it was important. Surely parents whose children have just died really don't care about the cup they are drinking from; a plastic one would serve the purpose.

But withdrawing treatment from a child has been the moment I have been dreading throughout my training. It has been the one thing people have asked me about and something I have tried to put out of my mind. I couldn't stand to think about it; about how I would feel when I knew a child was going to die, not by accident, not by mistake, but by planning; recognising and rationally deciding there is no more that can be done to save that child's life. I didn't think about it happening; I naively assumed it would be something that would always happen on someone else's shift.

Today it was on my shift.

I was asked to make the tea and the nurse gave me a knowing look when she asked me. I knew it had to be the good cups. This wasn't any cup of tea; it was THE cup of tea. This would be the drink the family would have while they watched their child die.

Suddenly the cups were the most important thing to me. I washed them thoroughly and made the teaspoons sparkle. There would be no milk from the bottle on this day; instead I poured it carefully into the jug, desperate not to spill any. I didn't want to make this drink as much as the parents didn't want to drink it. I willed the kettle not to boil, begged time to stop and thought about what I would say when I took the tea in. No words would be enough and saying nothing wouldn't be right.

Watching the staff I realised that nursing isn't always about the big gestures. It isn't what you say; it's just being there that's important; behaving normally, sensitively and openly, accepting the family and giving them time. Each family will behave differently, but this is their moment and in it they need us, maybe just to be there, maybe not to be there, but they need to know we are there.

I left the tray in the room and said the only thing I could: "If you need anything else, I'll be just outside."

When the machines had stopped whirring, the child had stopped breathing and the family had stopped crying, the granddad came from the room and brought me the tray. As he passed it to me I noticed that each cup had been used and he said "thank you". He didn't mean for the tea.

Today I learnt there is no tea service I want to see less than the posh one, but I know each time I use it the family will remember the cup, the tray, the sugar bowl. Suddenly I'm grateful we have a tea set that says more than words.

Jayne Steer is a third year nursing student at Wolverhampton University.



Student booking form

RCN Congress and Exhibition 2010 is **FREE** to attend.

Please complete all parts of this form in BLOCK CAPITALS. Please note that only fully completed forms will be accepted. This will ensure your fast-track entry to RCN Congress and Exhibition 2010 on the day.

Voting members: If you have been selected to vote on behalf of your branch, forum, committee or the Association of Nursing Students, please contact the Chair or Branch Secretary of your group to arrange your registration.

Are you attending (please tick):

- Congress debates (RCN members only), exhibition and fringe programme
 Congress debates only (RCN members only)
 Exhibition and fringe programme only

Are you an RCN member? Yes No RCN membership number*

*If you do not know your membership number, please call RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100 between 8.30am – 8.30pm, Monday to Friday.

Title Forename Surname

Email address

Acknowledgement of your booking will be sent by email only. If you do not supply a correct email address we are unable to send you acknowledgement of your booking. Event information, including directions, will be sent to you approximately two weeks prior to the event.

Mobile telephone number Home telephone number

Preferred mailing address

City County Postcode

University or college

What year of study are you in? First Second Third Are you attending as part of a coach party? Yes No

Do you require child care facilities? Yes No (information will be sent to you at a later date)

Please let us know of any individual requirements you may have (dietary, accessibility etc)

Please let us know when you will be attending RCN Congress and Exhibition 2010

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sunday 25 April | | PM | <input type="checkbox"/> | Congress opening only | |
| Monday 26 April | AM | <input type="checkbox"/> | PM | <input type="checkbox"/> | Congress debates, exhibition and fringe programme |
| Tuesday 27 April | AM | <input type="checkbox"/> | PM | <input type="checkbox"/> | Students' Day , Congress debates, exhibition and fringe programme |
| Wednesday 28 April | AM | <input type="checkbox"/> | PM | <input type="checkbox"/> | Congress debates, exhibition and fringe programme |
| Thursday 29 April | AM | <input type="checkbox"/> | PM | <input type="checkbox"/> | Congress debates and fringe programme |

Congress hosts many social events throughout the week which are free for RCN members. Please let us know if you plan to attend any of the following social events*

- Sunday night *Nursing Standard* disco
 Monday night Congress party
 Tuesday night Students' Party (open to all students)
 Thursday night End of Congress party

Throughout RCN Congress and Exhibition 2010, we are running our **Fit for Congress** programme. Come along and take part in our fun events to get fit for Congress and fit for practice.

* all social events require a ticket for entry which will be sent in your 'Congress and exhibition pack'. Your ticket for the Students' Party will be provided on the day

Data protection We like to keep you informed about services, campaigns, events, publications and new initiatives. It is also important for us to find out your views on a range of issues. This may be by post, telephone or electronic mail. Should you NOT want us to do this, please tick this box.

In addition we often negotiate favourable rates for a variety of externally provided services. This may be by post or electronic mail. Should you like to take advantage of this, please tick this box.

Please send your completed application form to:

- RCN Congress 2010 Registration, PO Box 2329, Cardiff CF23 8YZ
 - Register online at www.rcn.org.uk/congress2010
 - Telephone Events Registration on 029 2054 6460
- The closing date for pre-registrations is **Wednesday 14 April 2010**. Thereafter registrations should be made in person at Bournemouth International Centre. For further information about RCN Congress and Exhibition 2010, visit www.rcn.org.uk/congress2010