

Speaking on behalf of the RCN: a practical guide

Why engage with the media?

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing and has almost half a million members working across health and social care services. Understandably, it is often the media's first port of call for a comment on issues related to nursing.

As a membership organisation, we have a responsibility to promote the interests of our members – including through the media. We also have a reputation to protect – and negative stories in the media about the RCN can undermine that reputation.

Put simply, the reason for us to engage the media is to amplify positive messages about nursing and mute as much as possible any negative ones.

Our staff and members have a key role to play in that: publicising the great work the College does both as a trade union and professional body can help promote nursing enormously, as can frontline staff talking publicly about their experiences. The pandemic has clearly shown that.

This doesn't mean that we respond to every media enquiry we get. On the contrary, we turn many down: such as when another organisation might be better placed to comment or if it's a story we don't want our name associated with. The RCN has regional/country communications teams and a London-based, UK-wide Media Team, many of whom are ex-journalists, who are expertly placed to make those judgment calls.



First steps

What to do if a journalist calls you

- Don't give an interview there and then.
- Make a note of their name, contact details, what they want to speak to you about and when their deadline is.
- If it is a local media enquiry then refer the journalist to your regional/country communications team. Enquiries from the national media are usually dealt with by our Media Team based in London. See [appendix](#) for those contact details.
- Often the journalist's deadline will be imminent/the same day. Doing media work may involve prioritising it over your workload for a time.

Next

- Ring your regional/country communications team or UK-wide Media Team (see [appendix](#) for details).
- The RCN staff member will ask you whether or not you are keen to do the interview and what your availability is.
- If you do want to do the interview, ask whether the RCN has key messages on the topic in question (such as nurses' pay) and advice on how to approach the interview. If there are key messages, the RCN will email them to you. Read and digest them, and have them to hand when you do the interview.
- The RCN will help you arrange the logistics of doing the interview, such as doing it via Teams/Zoom.
- Discuss with the RCN whether it would be appropriate to notify your employer about the interview. Your employer may have concerns about you doing the interview, such as over the subject matter or their organisation being identified.

Preparing for the interview

- Preparation is key. Journalists approach the RCN for comment on stories because we are the trusted voice of nursing. They are not looking to catch us out.
- Journalists are not your enemy – but equally they are not your friend. They are potentially a powerful ally and a way of getting our key messages on important issues for us (such as nurses' pay) into the public domain. But be aware, anything you say to a journalist on the record, they are entitled to publish (more on this under [Doing the interview](#)).
- Secondly, you must be mindful at all times that you are speaking on behalf of the RCN. As such, it is imperative that the opinions you express are in line with the College's – that's why it's essential you know what those key messages (for example, on nurses' pay) are. If you disagree with the College's stance on the issue in question, it may not be appropriate for you to do the interview.
- This is not to say you can't cite personal experience – you can, and should, as it can powerfully illustrate your point – but often how comfortable you feel about doing this comes with experience.

Written quotes/blogs

The RCN's UK-wide Media Team and regional/country communications teams get many press enquiries a day, often print journalists asking for written quotes. Our media teams are skilled in writing these quotes quickly and can help you draft one in response to your media enquiry. The same is true of blogs. Do ask for their help.

If you are helping to draft a media statement or blog, then bear in mind the following.

1. You'll need to do it quickly.
2. Be concise – if your quote is waffly or uses flowery language, it is much less likely to be used. A media statement might be around 100 words only – use those words carefully. Look at the RCN's website for media statements we have put out to give you some examples.
3. Include the RCN's key messages on that topic, where they are available.
4. If it's a blog, try to structure it, as you would a short story, with a middle, beginning and end. Think of a hook – do you have an anecdote, possibly about a member you know, which would powerfully illustrate in a human, emotional way the point you are trying to make? But remember not to share a friend, colleague or patient's story in a way that they could be identified - unless they have given you their permission.

Speaking off the record

- Always seek guidance from RCN staff before speaking to a journalist off the record.
- Speaking off the record means that the journalist can't attribute what you say to you. It does not mean they can't use that information – they can if they can confirm it from another source.
- Think carefully before speaking off the record.

Broadcast interviews

Whether it is a live or a pre-recorded interview it is crucial you know what the RCN's key messages on the topic are.

Remember, is your employer happy with you wearing your uniform or lanyard, or the interview being carried out in an identifiable place?

For pre-recorded interviews

- Be mindful that only a very small clip from the interview is likely to be used.
- According to the [27-9-3 messaging system](#) the average written quote in a newspaper contains 27 words, the average TV/radio soundbite is nine seconds long, and you'll only get up to three key messages across in your interview clip.
- Think what your three key messages are. How else could you say them? If you say them several different ways, then however your interview is edited you are still likely to get at least one of them across. Note: you may be interviewed for 30 minutes for a nine-second soundbite.

For example, if the issue is nurses' pay, you could say:

1. nurses have been underpaid for years
2. nursing staff earn less now than they did in 2010
3. according to a RCN member survey earlier this year, some nurses are thinking of leaving the profession because of low pay
4. not paying nurses properly contributes to short staffing on wards, which in turn puts patient safety at risk.

If you lose your train of thought in the middle of a pre-recorded interview, keep talking! Say something like: "Oh, I'm really sorry, that's not what I meant. Can I try again please?" That will make that section of the interview unusable. If you stop talking, there is the danger that clip could be used.

For live interviews

- Stick to your brief. If you are asked a question which is not about the topic you agreed to be interviewed on and you are uncomfortable answering, then don't answer it. You could say: "That's an interesting question but I'm here to talk about 'XXX' so I'd like to stick to that."
- If you lose your train of thought, pause and gather your thoughts before carrying on.

Practical tips on doing TV interviews in the pandemic era

- **Practice.** Most people are now very familiar with doing online meetings, but if you're not then familiarise yourself with using Team/Zoom/Facetime/Whatsapp ahead of the interview.
- **When doing the interview online, look at the camera.** If you gaze regularly wanders off the screen, it will make you look shifty.
- **Have your written notes to hand,** but try not to read them during the interview – they are merely an aide memoire in case you lose the thread of what you are saying. Jotting down a few numbers/statistics that you might want to say in the interview can be useful (to help you remember them).
- **Position your laptop/computer at eye level** – this avoids the camera looking up your nose and giving you a double chin!
- **Find a quiet room to do the room in,** with good broadband access, where you won't be interrupted during the interview. Please ask others at home not to disturb you during the interview and, if possible, for someone else to supervise your children (if you have any).

After the interview

Hopefully you will be pleased with how the interview has gone and have enjoyed the experience. Good interviewing skills come with practice.

Give feedback to the RCN media team afterwards – this is as helpful for them as it is for you. If you are unhappy with the interview or how what you said is presented in the media, then ask the media team to take this up with the journalist in question. If you've been misquoted in a newspaper/online, the press officer will ask for the quote to be amended online and, if appropriate, a correction printed in the paper. If it is a broadcast interview, then they will raise your complaint and seek an explanation.

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Appendix

UK-wide, London-based Media Team:

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