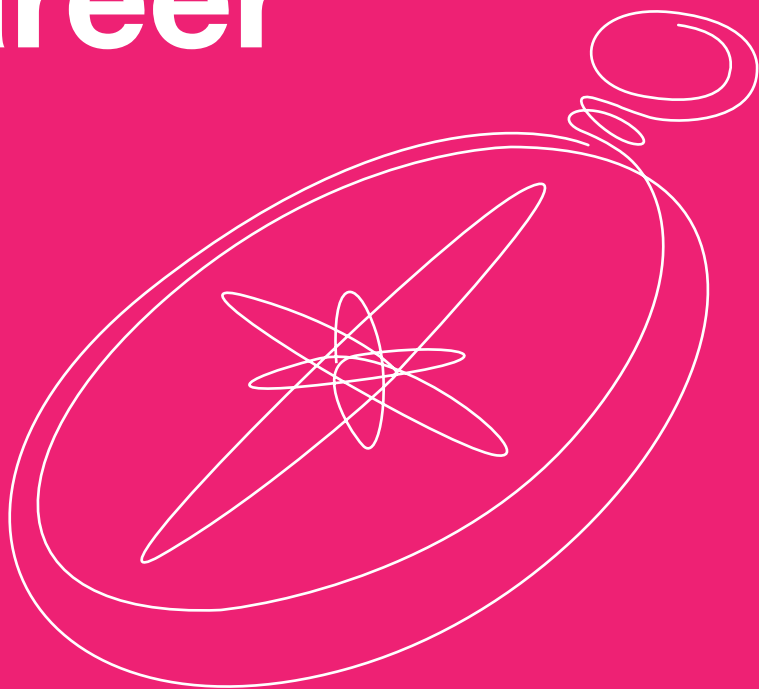


# Students: Thinking about your career



0345 772 6100  
[www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)



Royal College  
of Nursing

# Foreword



As a student nurse embarking in your final year of study you are most likely feeling stressed, anxious, worried and excited for your new career all at the same time. This is an important time to reflect on what you have achieved so far and to recognise the challenges that are ahead of you. You have already worked extremely hard to get to where you are today and should be proud of your successes. Working as a registered nurse is a challenging but rewarding career and we are fortunate to listen to and share the experiences of those we care for.

Thinking about a career after university can be daunting and can often cause concern, but it is important to remember that every registered nurse started as a student whether it was two or twenty years ago and it is through experience and knowledge that we can become confident in our profession.

The message we want to share with you is: you can do it! There may be times when you feel like you will never reach your end goals, but do not give up; stay determined and stay motivated and you will reach those goals. Everyone needs advice and guidance at some point in their education and this is why this booklet has been made: to help you get through this final year and to keep you on track to achieving registration.

You are the future of nursing and you have the power to make the difference. Good luck in your future career.

## The RCN

# Wide horizons

On the day you join the nursing register, you enter a world of possibilities and opportunities. Your nursing qualification can take you most places on the planet, working with the young or the old; with the well or the dying; with individuals or whole communities; in hospitals, homes or schools; on ships, planes or in battle zones; as a hands-on nurse, a manager or a – well, you get the picture.

It's time to consider your options. But where do you start? Here are some ideas.

- Think hard about all that you have experienced in your nursing career so far. Which aspects have you enjoyed the most and why? Was it the team? The environment? The variety of skills required for the job? Also, consider how your strengths match your preferred options.
- Reflect on the things you have least enjoyed and why – was it the speciality itself or other factors such as staff shortages?
- Talk to colleagues, peers, your tutors and mentors to get real experiences of various roles.
- Make the effort to find out about those fields you haven't yet covered. Gather a variety of role descriptions from job adverts and list the pros and cons of each role. Consider all the practical aspects such as hours of work, support with education and future job security.
- Don't forget to look at the less obvious employers such as charities, hospices, prison services, blood transfusion services and occupational health service providers.
- Try to gain some shadowing experience or an informal visit, as even a day can provide an insight into future career opportunities. Visiting a potential employer can also be useful to make sure it's the right role and environment for you.
- Be mindful of your job security and look into growth areas where there are more opportunities – for example, working with older people, management of long-term conditions and community-based roles.
- Are there rotational posts for newly registered nurses where you work? These offer an ideal opportunity to sample a range of specialist areas while gaining competences and developing your career along the way.
- Finally, make sure your personal development plan includes some career objectives, and do seek guidance.

## Need some help?

The RCN Careers Service offers a wide range of helpful resources at [www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)

For those members who need additional guidance, we offer one-to-one careers coaching.

# Applying for jobs

Once you have an idea of the sort of role you're looking for, it's time to put maximum effort into the job application process. Remember that as an RCN member you can access our CV feedback service and sample CV's online at [www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)

## Your CV

While many jobs simply ask that you complete an application form, it's also useful to create a CV that you can add to your portfolio to present to prospective employers and useful contacts.

Successful CVs are logical, accurate and concise. Most importantly they're tailored to the people reading them – so make sure you adapt yours accordingly, using relevant key words for the job you're applying for.

There's no perfect format for a CV but you can use the following sections to create one that's easy to follow.

### Personal details

Include your name, address, preferred contact telephone number and email address.

### Opening statement

Provide a short paragraph to open up your CV and tell your prospective employer a bit about you. Always tailor this section to the job you're going for. You could include:

- Your personal qualities
- A brief overview of your academic and/or professional experience/history
- What you think you'd bring to the role
- Your career objective

### Employment/experience

Working backwards, list the placements you have undertaken while training, with dates and names of employers. Describe what you've achieved and the skills you gained, giving specific evidence of your competences. If you had any other work experience prior to your nurse training, summarise it with a list of job titles and dates held.

### Education

Provide the dates you attended and names of your school, college and university. Work backwards chronologically and highlight the qualifications gained, any special achievements and relevant professional activities.

## Professional activities

Include details of things such as events and training days you've attended, membership of professional bodies, and any student union or RCN activities.

## Other activities

You may want to include extra information about your interests outside work and whether you hold a driving licence.

## CV tips

- Try to use “action” words. See box right. These will bring your application to life.
- Explain gaps in paid employment prior to nurse training; for example to raise a family, go travelling or care for a relative – remember that these are responsible reasons that bring extra skills and experience.
- Think about any achievements you've gained through voluntary work.
- Use numbers and facts to create an impact; for example, “during my recent placement I was responsible for the care of six patients, working with a support worker and a first-year student.”
- Don't exceed two pages – keep it to the point.
- Avoid using too many font styles. Keep it simple.
- Don't use abbreviations that will not be recognised easily.
- Inclusion of contact details for referees is optional. Add them if you're happy for them to be contacted.
- If targeting the CV at potential employers, enclose a covering letter highlighting the main points of your CV and how they relate to the post for which you're applying.
- Get at least two people to proof read your CV for errors. Ask for constructive feedback, whether it's easy to read and if it makes an impact. The RCN Careers service have online resources with CV tips and feedback and sample CV's, visit [www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)

### Action words

identified

initiated

established

organised

launched

implemented

successfully

improved

trained

managed

developed

produced

negotiated

created

recognised

fulfilled

co-ordinated



## Application forms

Choose a job that is right for you, your skill set, your personality and your values. You may want to speak with a careers adviser to help you identify and reflect on what your values and skills are.

Do your homework with regards to the level and depth of support you will be offered if you are successful in securing a job. Check what resources would be available to help you with your transition from student to newly qualified nurse. You'll want an employer that can offer you a robust preceptorship programme and nurturing learning environment.

The supporting information section is the most important part of your application. Go through the job description and person specification thoroughly and make sure you provide evidence to show how you meet all the requirements. Some NHS jobs will also provide a Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF) outline to map your experience against. If you're completing a paper application form, ideally you should type this section, and attach it as a separate sheet of paper. If you have to write a supporting statement as part of your job application, don't forget that as an RCN member you can have this checked by the RCN Careers service to get advice, suggestions and feedback before you submit it.

Start gathering evidence to present in your supporting statement whilst on placement. Use it to remind yourself of occasions when you used your initiative and dealt with difficult situations – this will also be invaluable when preparing for job interviews.

If you're asked to declare any previous convictions and you do have any, you declare them, even if they occurred more than ten years ago. The interview panel will take account of the severity of the offence and whether it will impact on your role. All applicants for nursing roles need to undergo Disclosure and Barring Service checks (formerly CRB checks). If you have any doubts about your record, seek advice from RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100.

*“I got the job I wanted and found the advice from the RCN Careers Service very helpful. Because I did my placements at a different trust, I also went to see the practice development nurse from the department before I applied. I did a lot of reading about the trust and the department before writing my personal statement and I asked a lot of people from different backgrounds to read it through for me.”*

*Rona Ines*

## Supporting statement

Here’s a sample supporting statement for a newly qualified nurse applying for a post on a respiratory ward.

I am applying for a post on Beatrice ward as I have a strong commitment to meeting the needs of patients and families affected by respiratory conditions. I developed my interest in this field during a ten-week management placement on a respiratory unit, where I particularly enjoyed teaching patients how to manage and control their symptoms through careful use of inhalers and the use of anxiety-reducing techniques. As a student, I completed a case study on a patient suffering from asthma and achieved a grade of 70 per cent. I also gained excellent feedback from my mentor and other staff on the unit, and really enjoyed working with the multidisciplinary team.

I believe that I meet the requirements mentioned in the person specification as detailed below.

### **Qualifications and experience**

I am an NMC-registered nurse and have recently completed degree-level pre-registration education, with an overall grade of upper-second class. The course provided a strong emphasis on evidence-based practice and I completed an extended essay on “The impact of lung cancer NICE guidelines on nursing practice.”

### **Skills and knowledge**

I have excellent communication skills and have always been able to deal with challenging situations. For example, a relative became angry about the

### *Supporting statement cont...*

treatment of his mother, and I was able to allay his anxiety by listening to and empathising with his concerns, and arranging for him to discuss his mother's care with the senior nurse in charge.

I have developed teaching and mentoring skills whilst supervising the work of health care support workers and students. I am keen to pursue a mentorship course as soon as possible. I have taught skills such as how to admit patients, perform dressings, use the patient administration system and monitor blood glucose levels. I always refer learners to relevant resources such as teaching packs, and check their understanding of the topic by asking questions, supervising their practice and giving constructive feedback.

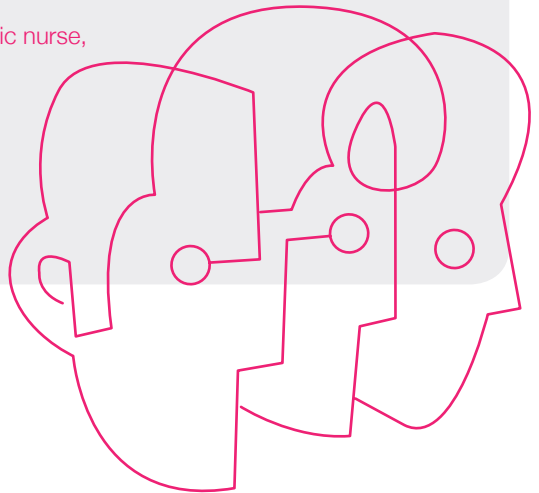
I also enjoy promoting patients' health, and teaching about the importance of healthy eating and smoking cessation. I have learnt how to prioritise a busy workload and usually manage the care of eight patients and the work of two health care support workers. On a particularly busy shift recently, I dealt with three emergency admissions, arranged two discharges and initiated life support for a patient suffering cardiac arrest. I have learnt the importance of effective delegation, communication, teamwork and referring to other health care professionals and senior staff when appropriate.

I keep up to date with national initiatives and have recently attended a workshop on the NMC's revalidation plans for third party feedback. At this event I contributed ideas about how to document feedback from patients about nursing care.

### **Personal qualities**

I am a cheerful, flexible and enthusiastic nurse, and am approachable at all times.

I am respectful towards all individuals, regardless of their background, and adhere strictly to all policies, including health and safety, infection control and confidentiality.





# Interviews

Attending interviews can be a daunting process, but with careful preparation you can increase your chances of success.

## Preparation

- Go through the person specification and job description carefully.
- Underline all the skills, experience and personal attributes required for the role. Look back on your training and experience and list examples that show how you meet the requirements for the post.
- Familiarise yourself with the trust or organisation's values and how you fit into these.
- Use the **STAR** technique – **Situation, Target, Action, Result** – to help you reflect on examples that demonstrate you have the competences outlined in the person specification.
- Update your portfolio and take it to your interview.
- Arrange a mock interview with a friend, senior colleague or careers adviser. Ask for constructive feedback and practise again if necessary.
- Prepare some questions for the interview panel – this demonstrates your interest in the role.
- Try to arrange an informal visit, where you can talk to staff, get some answers to your questions and assess whether the post and environment will meet your needs.
- Make sure you are up to date with national initiatives in health care.
- Plan your route to the interview. How long will it take you? Allow time for delays.
- Plan what you are going to wear for the interview. You need to look smart, clean and comfortable, but won't be expected to spend a fortune on a designer suit.
- Get a good night's sleep before the interview.

## STAR technique

### Situation

Explain what the situation was

### Target

What did you need to achieve?

### Action

What steps did you put into place to make this happen?

### Result

What was the outcome?

## Before the interview

- Eat something – this will help settle your nerves.
- Have one last look at your interview paperwork, but don't try to cram.
- Leave plenty of time to get there.
- When you arrive, don't be embarrassed to ask for a glass of water or the opportunity to freshen up.
- Take deep breaths to help control adrenaline.
- Employ logic to beat nervous thoughts; any interview question should be treated exactly as you would treat a job situation, because that's exactly what the job represents.
- And remember... that is also your opportunity to confirm that you want to work for the organisation.

## During the interview

- Remember to smile. Smiling releases endorphins, which make us feel better.
- Maintain open body language and eye contact – try to avoid nervous fidgeting.
- If you don't catch a question, ask to hear it again.
- Take time to consider your answers and don't be afraid of natural pauses in the flow of conversation.
- Speak slowly – nerves generally make us talk faster.
- Practise breathing from your stomach. This will help you to keep calm and talk clearly.

## Questions to ask

At the end of an interview, you may be given the opportunity to ask questions. Now the hardest part of the interview is over, you may want to get out of the room as soon as possible. But remember that an interview is a two-way process – you need to find out whether this is the right job for you.

Questions that may help you to find out more about the organisation and also impress the panel include:

**What support is available for newly qualified nurses?**

**What do you offer in terms of continuing professional development?**

**How would you describe the preceptorship/ induction programme?**

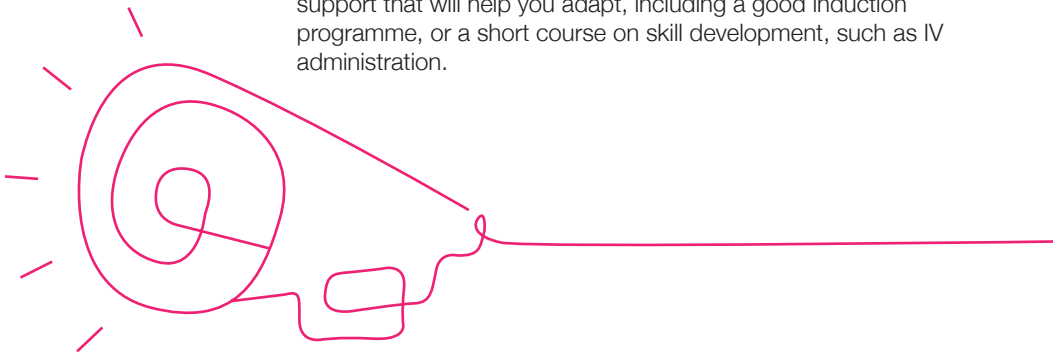
**What are the most significant issues that the ward/unit/organisation will face over the coming months?**

**I notice that you have recently introduced... How will this impact on the ward/unit/organisation?**

### **Difficult interview questions**

**What are your weaknesses/ development needs?**

Turn a negative into a positive. For example: "In the past, I have had a tendency to try to take on too much, but I have dealt with this by learning how to delegate responsibilities, prioritise by writing lists and planning my day in advance, and attending a time-management course." Remember as you will be new to the job, you can discuss possible weaknesses in terms of support that will help you adapt, including a good induction programme, or a short course on skill development, such as IV administration.



**Please give an example of a work situation that didn't work out very well**



To avoid dwelling on weaknesses, focus on the past, rather than the present and finish with what you learnt from the experience. For example: "As a junior student, I didn't fully appreciate the importance of advocating for the patient. A junior doctor was trying to take blood from a patient and found it very difficult to find a vein. The patient was anxious and moving their arm around, clearly in a lot of pain. Eventually the doctor had to give up and a more senior doctor took blood. Now that I have more experience I can see that that if the doctor had used a pillow to support the patient's arm he would have had more success. I would now have no hesitation in intervening much earlier to suggest that the patient have a break and that a more experienced person, such as the hospital phlebotomist, should take the blood."

**What would you do if you were the only qualified nurse on the ward when:**



- A patient falls out of bed?
- A member of the domestic staff cuts themselves on broken glass?
- You notice that some drugs are missing?

To demonstrate the competencies you have gained in your training, use the STAR technique described earlier.

The interview panel will want to know that you have common sense, and that patient safety and wellbeing are your priorities. For many scenarios there is a similar process that involves:

- assessment of the situation
- taking appropriate action following procedures and guidelines
- appropriate communication
- record keeping
- evaluating and learning from the situation.

**Tell us about a national initiative in nursing/health care**



You don't need to be an expert on every aspect of health care development and policy. Read summary documents on major initiatives. Telephone RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100 to get free publications on clinical areas and use the RCN website to update yourself on all major nursing initiatives.

**What do you understand by the term 'equality and diversity at work'?**



The RCN has a list of other common interview questions. You can find them at [www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)

Try to avoid saying "treating everybody in the same way" as this can appear over-simplistic. This question is usually about equality of access to services and treating colleagues with support and respect. It is also about being self-aware and how your own background, upbringing and culture may affect your interactions with those who are different from you in any way. Try to get hold of the organisation's equality and diversity policy or statement, if there is one, so that you can refer to it. Have a basic understanding of equality legislation around gender, sexuality, age, race and disability discrimination.

## Assessment centres

Increasingly, organisations use more than an interview to assess a job applicant's suitability for a post. An assessment centre consists of one or more activities to enable the selection panel to decide who best meets the requirements of the job.

Attending an assessment centre can be a daunting prospect, but as long as you prepare beforehand, you can gain a much better insight into your strengths and development needs. If you perform less well in one area you may be able to make up points in another area. Employers that use this form of selection have often invested a great deal of money and resources to ensure that they provide a fair selection process. Such employers will often provide written feedback with analysis of your scores and rationale for the marks given. Others will provide face-to-face feedback before you leave.

1

**Tests of numeracy and literacy skills**

Numeracy tests often include drug calculations. Literacy tests may include a written comprehension of a text, where candidates are tested on their ability to understand and summarise information and write clearly.

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2

**Written scenarios/case study exercises**

These often test clinical competences and nursing knowledge. For example, you may be given a clinical scenario and a series of questions to answer, or a care planning exercise.

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3

**Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)**

This is an assessment of clinical competence, where components of the competence are tested individually. Often simulation techniques are used, using mannequins, for example. You may be asked to demonstrate how you would safely assess and manage a patient presenting a problem.

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4

**Presentations**

You may be asked to present on a topic, either sent in advance of the assessment date or given on the day, with time allowed to prepare the presentation beforehand.

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5

**Group discussion about a topic**

You may be given a topic to discuss, or a problem to solve. Often employers are testing communication skills, checking that you interact well with others and listen, as well as contribute, to the task. Success depends on contributing enough, without dominating and interrupting the discussion. It is helpful to stay positive throughout and to reflect on what has been discussed periodically.

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6

**Role-play exercises**

You may be asked to work with other candidates to show how you would respond to a professional scenario. Sometimes actors, or one of the assessors, will play the role of a patient or client. You should behave as you normally would in your nursing role.

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7

**Psychometric tests**

Psychometric tests are structured assessment methods. They may include aptitude or ability tests, personality questionnaires, or a combination of both. Employers may be keen to look for certain values or attitudes which are necessary to providing compassionate, dignified care.

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## Preparing for an assessment centre

- You will be assessed against the criteria outlined in the job description and person specification, so it is important that you know these documents inside out.
- Read the guidance notes carefully. Make sure you take spare pencils, stationery etc if asked to bring these.
- Visit the employer's website so you know as much about the organisation as possible.
- Reflect on your own style and its impact on potential group activities. If you are naturally very talkative, remind yourself that you may need to focus more on listening. If you are very quiet, remember that you will need to speak up to make an impact on the assessors.
- Reflect on your "best self": think of a time when you have worked really well in a team or when your contribution was valued by colleagues or patients. Think about the skills you used in that situation and the behaviours you displayed.
- If you have a disability that may affect your performance in any activities, make sure you let the employer know beforehand.
- Plan your outfit and make sure you look clean, smart and professional.
- Make sure you plan your journey and how long it will take, allowing for delays.
- Get plenty of rest the day before as it will be quite tiring.

## At the assessment centre

- Be positive and enthusiastic, but don't act. Try not to see the other candidates as competitors.
- Assume that you are being assessed at all times.
- Have good eye contact with the people you meet and smile when appropriate.
- Make sure you read all the information relevant to each task and listen carefully to any instructions. If there is anything you are not clear about, ask one of the facilitators.
- Take opportunities to have a break and take refreshments, where offered, as these will help keep up your stamina throughout the day.

# After the interview

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## **Congratulations – you've been offered the job!**

Employers will usually make you a conditional offer first. They will then follow up with a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check (the new name for Criminal Records Bureau and the Independent Safeguarding Authority). In Scotland the checking and barring service is operated by Disclosure Scotland.

You will also be asked to complete a health questionnaire, which will be assessed by an occupational health professional. You may need to meet with an occupational health nurse or doctor if you have any specific health or wellbeing needs. They will also assess whether any reasonable adjustments should be made on the basis of a disability.

The employer will also follow up references and check your NMC registration details, if applicable.

If you have any concerns about any of the above, the RCN will provide you with guidance and support.

## **You didn't get the job – how to improve your skills**

It's natural to feel disappointed and hurt after an unsuccessful interview, but try not to let these feelings act as a block to moving on. Reflect on your performance: write down what worked and what didn't. List the questions that gave you the most difficulty. How would you respond next time?

Take the courage to contact a member of the interview panel and ask for constructive feedback on your performance. Some employers will even send you a written summary of the panel's scoring and notes about your answers. Often the improvements you need to make might be quite small, but will make a big difference to your performance next time. If for any reason you believe that discrimination has occurred, seek advice from the RCN.

Make use of all the resources available to you as a member of the RCN including the RCN Careers Service, which can help you to improve on any weak spots.

[www.rcn.org.uk/careers](http://www.rcn.org.uk/careers)





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0345 772 6100

**For 100 years, we've had the privilege of supporting and protecting the nursing team within the UK. And as a final year student or a newly registered nurse, we want to let you know what RCN membership can do for you.**

- *Starting your career* book – a guide and point of reference for newly registered nurses.
- One-to-one careers coaching and online careers resources.
- Student Money Guide, sponsored by Lighthouse Financial Advice [www.rcn.org.uk/students](http://www.rcn.org.uk/students)
- Debt and money advice.
- An accredited counselling service providing support for personal or work related issues.
- The RCN Library, the largest nursing library and e-library in Europe.
- The largest legal team of any union in the UK.
- Benefits advice and case work.
- Immigration advice.
- 35 professional forums.
- *Healthy Workplace, Healthy You* [www.rcn.org.uk/healthyworkplace](http://www.rcn.org.uk/healthyworkplace)
- Peer support group available for students suffering from ill health or disability-related issues.
- RCNXtra online benefits scheme.
- Conferences, events, courses and publications.

Join online or visit [www.rcn.org.uk/students](http://www.rcn.org.uk/students) to see how you can get the most out of your membership

# Transitioning from placement to employment with a disability

If you chose to disclose a disability on placement, hopefully your experience was a good one. It's important that you get the adjustments you need to be able to be your best once you move in to work and to do that you will need to disclose again.

**Here are our top tips.**

- Don't put it off. It is best to get adjustments in place as soon as possible, and they do take time to arrange. Delaying can cause stress and worry that exacerbate the situation.
- Be honest and open. Telling a new employer about a disability can be daunting. Prepare and aim to be practical, positive, and bring solutions. Think about what you need to get from the conversation.
- Know your rights. It's illegal to treat someone differently at work because they have a disability. If you have a disability, you are entitled to reasonable adjustments at work by law.
- Celebrate it! Your insight into life as a patient or being disabled can add a new dimension to your understanding as a care giver, and skills including increased resilience, resourcefulness and empathy. You are a valuable resource and your employer is lucky to have you!
- See our publication *Reasonable adjustments: a guide for members affected by disability in the workplace* for more guidance on this issue.
- Join the Peer Support Service [www.rcn.org.uk/peersupport](http://www.rcn.org.uk/peersupport) to share tips and experiences, and give and receive support with other members with ill health or disability issues.

If you have having problems negotiating reasonable adjustments, contact your local RCN representative, who will check your employer is acting fairly/reasonably, and work with them to ensure the best possible outcome for you.



**RCN**  
Leadership



Royal College  
of Nursing

# Developing Leadership Programme

For aspiring leaders within the nursing profession

- ◆ Understand the characteristics of effective leadership and how it underpins your role
- ◆ Learn how to positively influence those around you
- ◆ Identify and challenge barriers which have an impact on the safe delivery of care
- ◆ Develop strategies for improving your resilience and maintaining momentum during times of change

*"I have loved this course. I feel motivated and empowered to implement changes and discuss ideas in my clinical area."*

DLP participant, Scotland

Find out more  
about the  
programme on  
our website:  
[rcn.org.uk/  
leadership](https://rcn.org.uk/leadership)

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# Need help?

RCN Direct is the gateway to the RCN and provides comprehensive information and advice on a whole range of issues including:

- employment
- nursing
- membership
- journal subscriptions.

**[www.rcn.org.uk/direct](http://www.rcn.org.uk/direct)**

**Tel:** 0345 772 6100

**Overseas:** 00 44 20 7647 3456

**Advice:** 8.30am-8.30pm, seven days a week, 365 days a year

**Membership:** 8.30am-8.30pm, Monday-Friday (excluding bank holidays)

## RCN online

- [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk)
- [www.facebook.com/royalcollegeofnursing](https://www.facebook.com/royalcollegeofnursing)
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