

## **My Experience of the NHS**

At 16 I decided I wanted to be a nurse. I looked into the idea and what qualifications I needed, applied to a few nursing schools and spoke to my family. My parent's reaction was lovely. My mum said her father always wanted a nurse in the family. He died a few months before I was born. I'm named after him. This helped confirm my decision. I then found out for some nursing schools you had to be over 5 foot 2, and others even taller! I was accepted into a nursing school at South Sefton as long as I passed my medical. Being 17 I was pretty fit and healthy, I gave my height, weight etc in on a form, and they checked everything. Well, that's where I found out I wasn't 5 foot as previously written. "I'm sorry Miss, you're 4 foot 10 and 3 quarters!" I heard them say. Thankfully they didn't have a height restriction. South Sefton School of Nursing it was. I began on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1989. I was 17 and a half years of age, which was the youngest age they would accept people to start. I was waved off by mum as I headed to the bus to start the first day of the rest of my life. I was even going to be paid to train, this doesn't happen anymore. My first year's annual wage was £5150.

### **Training**

My first patient experience was a Medical ward in Walton hospital. There were people there who had suffered heart attacks and were attached to cardiac monitors. I didn't dare look at the "squiggly" lines as I hadn't a clue what they meant, although now I've worked in that speciality for 24 years. Patients were put on bed rest for 5 days before they could sit out of bed for the next 2 days. Then they were slowly able to mobilise. Now in the NHS they are straight into a cath lab from the ambulance, the artery opened and secured by a stent, and home within 3 days.

I experienced the sight of what an epileptic fit looked like, whilst being behind the curtains alone with a patient. I was only trying to shave his face after giving him a bed bath!

During my 3 years nurse training over 3 different hospitals I worked on speciality wards including Orthopaedics, Elderly, Surgical, Medical, Maternity and Labour, and Children's Cystic Fibrosis and Diabetes. I have so many stories that stick in my mind. Maternity ward wasn't for me, but the labour ward was amazing! I saw my first baby being born by caesarean section. I thought the lady was haemorrhaging, but then my nurse mentor told me that the fluid were the waters that protect the baby in the womb. I saw my first set of twins being born. In those days the placenta was chucked on the floor out of the way. As I finished my shift one day I looked at it, went home to tell my parents about my amazing experiences, and mum was cooking liver for our dinner. That was the last time I have eaten liver, it looked too much like a placenta!

Some days were hard, and stressful, others were amazing. Seeing people pass away, cardiac arrests, families upset, a massive contrast to lives saved, and patients able to go back home. I was between the ages of 17 and 20 during my training. People ask me if that was too young. Everyone is different. I had no "life experience" but I was learning day by day and soaking up the knowledge, and looking up to my peers. There was illness in my home life, which I feel helped me become a more empathic nurse. I could better understand the sides of nurse, patient and families feelings.

I came across mentors a variety of mentors, some who were struggling themselves with depression, alcohol addiction, and anorexia. In my first year there was a third year student nurse who noticed I was having a bad day. She called me into the sluice. Asked if I was ok, obviously I put on a brave face. She had real skills, and would go on to be a fantastic nurse. She said to me, "What I do now, I want you to copy"..... She got hold of a cup, held it in the air and threw it down so that it smashed in pieces! I looked at her shocked. She said "I don't know about you, but I now feel great!" We laughed, cleaned up, and got straight back into

the shift. Nowadays with cost cutting we would probably get told off and charged for that cup! I won't incriminate myself to say if I copied her or not.

One of my saddest times during training was working on the children's ward in Alder Hey. I learned a lot about diabetes and cystic fibrosis. I found myself showing young children how to inject themselves with an insulin syringe. I was with my mentor, and she was explaining to the children what the needle looked like, and how to work the syringe. She then passed it to me and told me to show them how to lift a bit of fat around my arm and shove a needle in. How naive was I? I just did it! If anyone asked me now to inject myself I'd tell them where to go. The children on this ward were up to the age of 18. I was only about that age myself. There was a young girl with cystic fibrosis becoming very ill, I'll always remember her. A famous actor from Brookside was brought in to visit her. She was a massive fan. He had recently recorded a song and it was in the charts. It made her day, possibly her life. She passed away a couple of weeks later. Nowadays these children are making it into adulthood and living healthier lives due to advances in research and treatment in the NHS.

During my time on the Neurology ward, my dad had a kidney transplant in the Royal Liverpool hospital. I found myself trying to be a professional student nurse by day, and a strong but worried daughter by night. I saw the work of the NHS on two sides. Before this my dad had needed kidney dialysis for a year. He received this at a local dialysis centre. This has now moved to inside one of the general hospitals. Dad would be connected up to dialysis for 4 hours three times a week. Nearly every time I would sit with him and play board games, and card games. We would make sure we saved up our 1p pieces as that's what we betted per game! On a good night I would win 8p.

### **Qualified**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> December 1992, aged 20, I qualified as a Registered General Nurse. I actually did it! This was when the real life begins. I applied to a few nursing posts. My first job was on a Medical Admissions Unit set up due to winter pressures. It was a night shift, in a hospital I had never worked in, with different paperwork to what I was used to. This would never happen now, as every newly qualified nurse has a mentor and a period of time to settle in to a new job. By 1am that night I phoned my mum crying. I didn't feel confident. She told me she would come and collect me. I told her she can't as I am an adult now! The job improved after that first initial panic. My contract was for 3 months.

My next job was in Gastroenterology, working in the day unit. We assisted in carrying out tests with scopes that looked inside the oesophagus, stomach, and bowels. This was certainly fascinating seeing the insides of people while they were still awake. Being positive and calming for patients before, during and after their procedures. It was always an exciting day when a celebrity sports person was coming to have a test! Obviously no names would be revealed! My contract ran out just as the unit was moving to another hospital within the trust. I helped pack up the equipment with a colleague who I looked up to, and is still a friend now....until she also packed me away in a box as a joke. This contract lasted for 10 months.

Straight away I got a post on the Coronary Care Unit. I stayed in this post for 23 years. During this time I married, had 3 children, and got promotion, to work as a nursing sister. This is where I saw a massive difference in the care and treatment in the NHS. In the first few years, due to the nature of the ward so many patients would be critically ill, or die due to having a heart attack, angina or heart failure. Over the course of many years the immediate treatment improved their chances of life. The monitoring systems improved, the medication improved, and the chance of having and surviving surgery for patients was improved. In time I found that there were less acutely ill patients, as these would go straight to a specialised hospital via the ambulance service. More patients were admitted with chronic heart conditions.

Possibly the people who were saved from being acutely ill years earlier, and now have slow progressing heart conditions. As time went on, and the NHS started to struggle, staff morale was becoming at an all time low. I have always said to people if you don't enjoy your job, then move onto the next. Many did. During the last few years of working in this post I had a lot of family illness. My husband was involved in a motorbike crash and being in hospital for 5 weeks. My auntie, my grandma, and my step father all passed away. My sister required a kidney transplant, and my mum was about to be diagnosed with terminal cancer. I had experiences with many hospitals, hospices, and care homes. It was time for me to move on. My mind wasn't on the job as passionately. I had to think what was lacking, and how could I improve as a nurse.

I decided to apply to a post as a staff nurse. It was a demotion from what I had been, but I wanted to learn about new conditions and treatments that I hadn't experienced before. I was still passionate about Cardiology. I applied to a hospital that was leading in advances in Cardiology. This was exciting, and it helped the return of my "mojo". My mum passed away 2 months after I started in this role. I took a bit of time out to gather my thoughts and decide if I wanted to continue working in the NHS. Management were very supportive. It's nice to know a work place can provide help if you need. On my return I had decided to give up and hand in my notice. Something happened within the first week of returning. I had a patient who would never know that they changed my mind. It was a lady who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, her family next to her needed a shoulder to cry on and a person to talk to.

This is the part of nursing that can't be taught. It's hard, can be emotional, but made me realise that nursing is my life and I wasn't going to quit. Soon afterwards I sat with a dying patient, whilst waiting to see if their family would get there in time. I found it extremely difficult, as the last person I did this for was my mum. I could honestly tell that family that their loved one did not die alone. To me that was the most important thing they needed to know. My colleagues were so supportive that shift. A couple of them knew how hard that was, checking I was ok later when I needed a couple of minutes to recompose myself.

Nobody goes into the nursing profession "for the money". You have to want to do the job, and love it. Nurses take on the role of so many positions. When I come home after a bad day and the family ask "how was today?" they have no idea what we see, hear and what sights stay in a nurses memory for life. I always take 15 minutes after every shift to change back to becoming a mum or wife again.

I am so proud to work and belong in the NHS, and so pleased to have chosen this career from an early age. There is so much more that I could write. I look at other countries and can't imagine there not being a NHS.