

## **Nursing and caring**

What makes a nurse consider a career in a nursing home? Few roles in nursing could be described as glamorous but the responsibility, long hours and minimal gratitude associated with working in this field – often as the sole registered nurse, makes this option unappealing to so many.

Rachel Kemp is a matron manager in a nursing care home for 68 residents in south Wales. She was recently recognised for her caring skills as the winner of the Nurse of the Year category at the Wales Care Awards. This is one of the top accolades at the awards and it was given in recognition of Rachel's dedication to providing dignity and compassion to those in her care with terminal illnesses.

Members of staff at Rachel's place of work (College Fields Nursing Home) and other homes backed the recommendation that Rachel should be honoured. "I was nominated by colleagues who felt that I had skills within the palliative care field," Rachel explains. "I was initially shocked but felt that my award was not only for me but for the whole team. We work together and without each other there is a missing part. Together we are a very strong team and provide an excellent quality of life for our residents."

Before working at the nursing home, Rachel had worked in NHS hospitals and in a wound healing research unit. This brought her into contact with the independent sector as she visited residents who had been referred to the unit. Rachel started doing bank shifts at the home as she missed 'hands on nursing' but while the thought of leaving the NHS was initially quite daunting, she soon realised that there were far more opportunities for her in the independent sector.

A modern matron's role in a nursing home is a busy one, with no such thing as a typical day. "Every day is completely different with new challenges and learning opportunities," says Rachel. "But I work with an amazing team of dedicated people who have the same vision that I do. This is vitally important as we are able to share ideas and learn together."

Rachel's job means that she has a lot of contact with older people, although not all residents are in this category. Her work reflects the national emphasis on care of the older people in Wales - the first UK country to have a Strategy for Older People. The Welsh Assembly Government appointed an Older People's Commissioner in 2008 and reports that nearly one in four people in Wales are now over 60. This will have an impact on the nature of nursing care needed in the future and there may be more nurses considering a role like Rachel's in the future. The national strategy aims to improve the health and well being of older people through initiatives to promote health to enable older people to live actively and independently in a suitable and safe environment of their choice.

### **[Subhead] Engaging with families**

Rachel is addressing these issues head on. She recognises that making an impact at work in a nursing home is often about improving life for the residents and has taken some unusual and innovative steps to ensure this happens.

"In the past year we have introduced 'new residents' to our home. We now have four chickens, two ducks, two lop-eared rabbits and two guinea-pigs. The interest that the animals have generated has been enormous. Our residents were involved from choosing the chickens in a local farm to grooming and cuddling them. Even the chickens enjoy being picked up and having contact with us."

Rachel was also part of the team who organised the second *Tapestry of Life* event. This gives residents the opportunity to show their talents and skills by entering the competitions and taking part in the day itself – which is a celebration of arts and crafts by people who live in care homes. "Many of our residents have remarkable creative talents and over many months

prepare exhibits that are outstanding and that would not normally be recognised. We also involve local schools and so there is a great deal of intergenerational work that is carried out unobtrusively,” says Rachel.

All employees are trained to strive to preserve and maintain the dignity, individuality and privacy of those living in the home and to be sensitive to the continuing changing needs of residents. It appears that the individuality of the residents is not forgotten and this is reflected in the home’s approach to therapeutic activities which takes into account the resident’s interests, skills, experiences, personalities and medical condition. But it is recognised that ‘joining in’ is not for everyone and the choice remains with the individual.

As with so many other nursing roles, communication is key. Staff at the home say Rachel has an uncanny knack to understand the trauma of families and to help them in coming to terms with the situations they face. Communication and understanding with patients and their families is really important, explains Rachel.

### **[Subhead] Changing attitudes**

But there remains a stigma surrounding work in a care home and this gives Rachel cause for concern. “There is still a negative opinion of care homes. Like everything in life there are good and not so good ones and I am often sad at the label given. There is a great deal of excellent practice in the independent sector and a well motivated workforce.”

The home where Rachel works employs a multi-disciplinary team including care assistants, administration and domestic staff. There are 92 staff in total at the home and Rachel is deeply involved in their development – ‘teaching and learning at the same time,’ she says. The importance of the residents is reflected in the training given to staff in areas such as the in-house care code of conduct, confidentiality, the rights of service users, health and safety, care assistants’ responsibilities and awareness of vulnerable adults.

“I believe that opinions and practices can only be changed when knowledge has been gained. I spend a great deal of my time researching, teaching and working with my team, my residents and their families. In doing this I am also improving my practice and my skills. In order to assist my staff I try to be at least one step ahead – this is always a challenge and juggling a profession, education and family life is sometimes very daunting.”

“Nursing to me has to be a vocation. You can teach the fundamental skills but in order to give person-centred care you have to be able to give of yourself. Care isn’t about ‘doing to’ but assisting the person to live their life as fully as they possibly can. It is being able to have a relationship with the person that allows them to realise that you value them as an individual and are concerned about them, their thoughts and feelings.”

### **Motivation**

Allowing a person to live their life as fully as they can is what motivates this nurse – but there are smaller, every day instances which help too. “Having a resident say ‘thank you’ for doing a job that I would class as miniscule but to them means the world,” Rachel says.

This nurse doesn’t see herself as particularly successful but admits that together with her team and the residents, they are ‘a force to be reckoned with’.

### **Resources**

[www.collegefieldsnursinghome.co.uk](http://www.collegefieldsnursinghome.co.uk)  
[www.tapestryoflife.org.uk](http://www.tapestryoflife.org.uk)