A work placement in the city of Pittsburgh in the United States gave nursing student Deborah Cooper new insights into caring for people and living in poverty.

Ms Cooper spent two weeks last September in the Pennsylvanian city between the second and third year of her nursing degree at Birmingham City University.

The placement included a training session focusing on the challenges facing people living on low incomes, which prompted Ms Cooper to think about how she can change things in her own practice.

‘We did a simulation exercise on people in the poorest circumstances. It turned out to be eye-opening and it gave me a push to look into what is available for people in the UK and what I can do to support them as a healthcare professional.’

The opportunity to study abroad came after Ms Cooper won a Cavell Nurses’ Trust student scholarship award. Winners of the five awards receive up to £2,000 to fund a travel placement. The trust, set up in the memory of heroic first world war nurse Edith Cavell, uses the awards to support inspiring and motivated students.

Relationships
Ms Cooper had the chance to compare the privately-funded US system with the NHS during her stay. ‘I found the relationship between the nurse and patient and the way the nurse cares and the discussions that go on are similar in the US to the UK. But there is a different emphasis when it comes to discharge. In the NHS a patient gets the medications they need and there is a level of support and that doesn’t happen in the US.’

Applications for the 2016 awards close on January 29. Second and third-year students can apply and this year there is an additional category for students in the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps reserves who are training to be a nurse, midwife or healthcare assistant.

Nursing students have other opportunities to travel and universities often encourage overseas placements and offer international exchange programmes. Organisations such as Work the World and Projects Abroad can arrange these placements.

Vicky Law, events and individual giving officer at the Cavell Nurses’ Trust, says: ‘Working abroad allows students to share best practice with other nurses and healthcare professionals from across the world, while learning from other cultures. Students also develop their communications skills in these different environments, learning that a reassuring gesture such as holding a patient’s hand can say more than words.’

Work the World arranged about 700 international placements for nursing students last year, mainly in developing countries. Joe Jamieson, communications manager, says: ‘Students tell us that they love the opportunity to observe and assist with patients who have conditions that are rare or simply don’t exist in the UK, like dengue fever.’

Ms Cooper says she would encourage other students to embrace an overseas placement. ‘It has given me a different perspective, which has prompted me to focus on the wider context of health care while I am studying’

Erin Dean is a freelance writer

RESOURCES
Cavell Nurses’ Trust awards
www.cavellnursestrust.org/awards

The world is your oyster
From dengue fever to inner-city poverty, Deborah Cooper found there is much to learn from an overseas placement

for students in the Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps reserves who are training to be a nurse, midwife or healthcare assistant.