Many staff nurses aspire to be a ward sister. But making a success of one of the toughest jobs in nursing requires careful preparation.

By Erin Dean

STEP UP TO A WARD SISTER ROLE

Many staff nurses aspire to be a ward sister. But making a success of one of the toughest jobs in nursing requires careful preparation.

By Erin Dean

Making the move up to ward sister is a big step, which some find difficult. Leadership training

Ms Callaghan, who works at University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH), made the move 18 months ago after working for almost 2 decades in the emergency department. She advises those keen to follow in her footsteps to become a deputy sister first, and then find out if their trust offers leadership and transformation courses.

‘Interview practice is essential, as the interview is tough,’ she says. ‘Think about enabling change, starting up projects, educating students. Ward sisters need to be consistently identifying what can be better on a ward.’

Making the move to being a ward sister or community team leader is the aspiration of many staff nurses. But those who have done it warn that it can be one of the toughest jobs in nursing.

The breadth of the ward sister and team community leader roles is huge, encompassing leadership and management, clinical practice, and education and teaching. Many nurses have not had responsibility for areas such as appraisals, rotas and budgeting before they start the job, so they learn by doing.

Theresa Shaw, chief executive of the Foundation of Nursing Studies, a centre for nursing innovation, says staff nurses who aspire to take up these posts need to develop their strengths and identify their weaknesses ruthlessly.

Mentors

Potential ways to do this include shadowing more senior members of staff, taking on temporary management roles and seeking out mentors.

‘It’s a big step, and it can be difficult,’ says Dr Shaw. ‘There are examples of people being promoted without the preparation, and though they have the passion and potential, the support has not been there before or when they take up the role.

‘As a ward sister or community team leader, so...’
‘Talk to other people who are in the role to understand what it is really about. The workplace can be a great classroom to develop skills through practice’

Theresa Shaw (pictured), chief executive, Foundation of Nursing Studies

much is about support and leading staff.
‘Talk to other people who are in the role to understand what it is really about, and think about the kind of skills they have. While there are many different kinds of leadership courses out there, people don’t necessarily need to go away from the workplace to learn.
‘The workplace can be a great classroom to develop skills through practice, as often people don’t retain that much from a course.’

Feedback
Asking for feedback on work is important and potentially useful, although many people are not good at giving constructive feedback, Dr Shaw warns.

RCN professional learning and development facilitator Christine McKenzie says that nurses preparing to become ward sisters should start building a supportive network, as evidence suggests this is important to build the resilience necessary for the demands of the role.

Nurses should consider which elements of the role they may already be performing that would support their move to a managerial position.
‘They may be performing a link role or be a designated lead for something,’ says Ms McKenzie. ‘Often, nurses have responsibilities, so how are they making the most of those responsibilities?
‘It is important to think about what you are already doing and what is transferable.’

Peer support
At UCLH, there has been a recognition of the complexities of the sister role, and extra support has been in place. The Rising Stars scheme is motivated partly by a desire to improve retention and to find those with the potential and aspiration to move into more senior roles in the future.

Sisters from UCLH and Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust get together away from the ward environment once a month to discuss work issues, provide peer support and develop resilience to deal with work pressures.

Developing skills
UCLH deputy chief nurse Lorraine Szeremeta is now developing a support programme for deputy ward sisters so they feel prepared to become sisters. The programme is due to start in September.

‘The ward sister role can be incredibly difficult, as you are expected to be everything to everybody,’ says Ms Szeremeta.

‘I’ve asked our deputy sisters about what they would want on such a programme, and they have come up with some really practical things – such as how to do a rota; how to take someone through a sickness capability programme; what if a member of staff isn’t performing in a role; and how to work within a set budget.

‘These will be going into the programme to develop our next ward sisters. We’re often not that brilliant in the NHS at preparing people to move into new roles, so we want to help people get skills and develop for their next job.’

Erin Dean is a freelance health writer

FAST FACT

16 band 7 nurses are currently on the Rising Stars programme, run jointly by UCLH and Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust

How to prepare for a ward manager or community team leader role:

» Ask for shadowing opportunities to learn more about the role.
» Ask for regular constructive feedback on your practice.
» Seek out mentors.
» Find out about learning programmes provided through your workplace.
» Develop a network to provide support and help build resilience.