Claire Harris, ward sister at Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport, South Wales, began training to be a nurse just ten years ago. Yet last year, she won the RCN Wales Nurse of the Year award for her role in delivering a stroke design programme and single-site stroke service at her local health board. She talks to Jennifer Sprinks about her career to date.

IT IS impressive enough to be crowned RCN Wales Nurse of the Year, but winning the accolade within six years of qualifying is an exceptional achievement.

Claire Harris, a ward sister at the Royal Gwent Hospital (RGH) in Newport, only began nurse training in 2006.

She was recognised at the awards for her role in delivering a stroke design programme at her health board. This led to the creation of a single-site stroke service and the introduction of 12 hyperacute stroke beds by January this year.

The unit has seen an increase in discharge rates and a reduction in the average length of stay for patients.

Even Ms Harris was surprised to win the award so early in her career, saying: 'There are so many nurses who work equally as hard as I do. I want the award to raise the profile of nursing because I love my job and I want to tell people what a good profession nursing is.'

Her win may inspire younger nurses, perhaps unaccustomed to such seniority or recognition among their age group.

'Newly qualified nurses ask me how I am a ward sister at such a young age,' Ms Harris says. 'I tell them it does not matter how old you are or what experience you have, but that you need the drive and passion for nursing. I tell them not to be put off or scared, but to go in with passion and seek out opportunities.'

She says the presence of strong role models has helped her progress because she has channelled her efforts into learning from good practice.

After qualifying in 2009, Ms Harris took a job as a newly qualified nurse at the RGH medical assessment unit.

She enjoyed the fast-paced environment and says the role provided an ‘excellent learning ground’ to equip her with invaluable skills for her career.

‘I became used to working with all specialties,’ she says. ‘After working in that environment, I thought I could work anywhere.’

She applied to become deputy ward sister in stroke care at RGH, where she already knew a ward sister. Three months later, the ward sister left and Ms Harris was asked to run the unit.

Redesign
When the unit was moved to a different location, Ms Harris helped to redesign the ward to improve patient care.

‘I was an advocate for a relatives’ room, a day room for patients, and an area where families and patients could spend time. We have a lot of therapies in stroke care so having a room where patients can access their therapies is useful. The day room is also used for lunch.’

More recently, she has played a role in the centralisation of stroke services at RGH.

‘I tried to implement change gradually so staff would not be overwhelmed by it,’ she says.

The RGH stroke unit is complemented by three other units, at Nevill Hall Hospital, Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr and St Woolos Hospital, which specialise in acute stroke care and rehabilitation.

Ms Harris set up a daily conference call between ward sisters in the four units to aid communication and patient flow.

‘I thought that, as ward sisters, we should be leading this,’ she explains. ‘Every morning, these four units check that patients are on the correct stroke pathways and sent to the appropriate places.’

As a result, the waiting times for patients to move from the emergency department to the stroke department have reduced, she says.

After finishing nurse training, Ms Harris had planned to train as a midwife but changed her mind during her nursing placements when she realised she loved working with older people in acute care.

‘I love the rapport you get with older people. As a nurse it is a privilege to find out about lives and hear their stories. It is really rewarding.’

She also finds job satisfaction in mentoring and coaching junior members of her team, as well as encouraging healthcare support workers to pursue nurse training.

‘I enjoy helping nurses to develop to the best of their ability and progress their career. I also enjoy nurturing newly qualified nurses within their transition from student to registered nurse.

‘Having been through these processes myself not so long ago, I can offer support and guidance, and act as a role model for what I have achieved in such a short career span.’

Jennifer Sprinks is an assistant editor at RCNi