Across the board

The word ‘diversity’ represents many things: religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender and disability. Sadly, in today’s society there are still misconceptions around what diversity is. To me, diversity is all about respecting the differences in people – their talents, skills and abilities. Diversity promotes equality not exclusivity. Smart organisations have long understood that the key to valuing people is to understand their differences and make positive use of them. In Black History month, this is a great opportunity to ask ourselves how ‘smart’ we are being in promoting diversity and encouraging people from every walk of life to join nursing.

Nursing, by its nature, serves and reflects the diversity that exists within our communities today. The RCN has long campaigned for a diverse workforce to help shape and provide quality care for the richly diverse communities of the UK. I wholeheartedly commend the Nursing Standard’s Nursing the Future campaign, which is actively involved in raising the profile of nursing and encouraging a greater variety of people to join the profession.

The demographic characteristics of the nursing population have changed significantly over the past couple of years as the UK remains reliant on the skills of nurses from overseas. More than 25 per cent of our most experienced nurses are eligible to retire in the next five years, so we owe it to patients to find flexible ways of working to retain these valuable nurses and create innovative ways of passing on knowledge through mentoring and training.

In London, where the highest concentration of black and minority ethnic (BME) nurses work (34 per cent), the RCN’s London Equality Network (LEN) has just celebrated its fifth birthday. Over five years LEN has empowered many members to challenge discrimination and break through barriers in inequalities.

In Black History month last year, the Department of Health launched a bid to crack its own glass ceiling by increasing the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) directors. Every delegate at the launch conference in Birmingham for the Breaking Through programme, was given the opportunity to network and attend presentations and workshops.

I went to two workshops, one of which focused on preparing individuals for board membership. This gave me a clear understanding of the non-executive director’s role and the responsibilities of the trust board to its local community.

I applied for a place on the programme and in March this year found myself in central London on the two-day development centre module. I had already completed a leadership qualities framework that was used during the module as one of the means of identifying areas of development.

Last year the RCN partnered with the NHS Confederation to develop more BME leaders within the health service. Today our BME forum consists of 25 inspirational nurse leaders and managers who are actively involved in promoting BME issues higher up the health agenda. These nurses are networking with the movers and shakers of the health sector and helping to make a difference in the delivery of better nursing care.

Mainstreaming diversity into every policy and decision has to be a priority of everyone in the health service to ensure equality and greater understanding of patient needs. The RCN’s strategic plan aims to give staff and members practical skills and competencies around diversity, in its fullest and widest sense, promoting the values and beliefs of the RCN.

The RCN Stepping Stones employment survey highlighted many inequalities that exist in the health service. I recognise that there is still a long way to go in getting it right for everyone. Organisational change takes time and persistence, but above all partnership working and mutual respect.

Beverly Malone is RCN general secretary

Primed for leadership

As an aspiring director on the Breaking Through programme, Elaine Rumble is learning ways to challenge the status quo

A variety of tools tested my ability to work within a team, lead others, follow direction and ‘think outside the box’. We were observed by the facilitators who then gave feedback. I found this most enlightening, showing me areas where I was developing and recommending that my next step should be progression to the ‘aspiring director’ module.

I was told I should be thinking about applying for director posts in the next 12 to 18 months. This immediately sparked my ‘there’s no way I could do it’ thinking. However I am now half way through the ‘aspiring director’ course and it has been one of the most difficult programmes I have undertaken. The constant self-analysis that is required, coupled with examining feedback from colleagues, has led to the realisation that I still have much to learn about myself and the impact I have on others.

The programme has given me the opportunity to reflect outside of a supervisory or managerial capacity, and to use these insights to challenge the status quo.

Elaine Rumble is deputy director of nursing at South London and Maudsley NHS Trust