Perhaps one of the most surprising things to come out of the recent survey by the Association of Nursing Students was the level of discrimination that students have to put up with.

In a survey of more than 600 students, 65 per cent said they had been discriminated against, either ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’. The most common type of discrimination (46 per cent) was simply due to being a student.

Smaller numbers cited other factors such as being too old, too young, the wrong race, being cheap labour, being male, being disabled or being a parent.

In one extreme case, Andrew Moyhing – a former nursing student who is now qualified but has left nursing – is currently pursuing a claim of sexual discrimination against two London trusts. He is being supported by the Equal Opportunities Commission.

The employment tribunal case, which began in October, heard how he felt that he was treated differently from female students and was prevented from taking part in some procedures, such as catheterisation of female patients, at the Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and Barts and The London NHS Trust.

His solicitor, Joanna Wade of the firm Palmer Wade, says:

‘Mr Moyhing says he was not given the same opportunities to learn as female students because there are some procedures which female students are allowed to perform on male patients, but male nursing students cannot perform on females.’

In a statement issued before the tribunal, Mr Moyhing said: ‘My objective in bringing this claim is not to win money for myself, but to bring about change for the better for both male and female nursing professionals.

‘I believe that if they are treated more equally than at present, a better standard of nursing care will be delivered to patients.’

He is seeking a change in policy so that male students will not automatically have to be chaperoned with a female patient if the opposite is not insisted on for female students.

Age can also be a cause of discrimination, despite the average age of students now being 29.

Jeremy Benton, who qualified in 2004, faced discrimination as a man and as a mature student. Mr Benton, who now works as a general nurse in Oxford Community Hospital, says: ‘I am in my early forties and I think younger, female tutors or mentors often feel intimidated by mature students. We have life skills and confidence that can be off-putting to them. Their attitude can be patronising as a consequence.’

One module on Mr Benton’s course featured a text that was written for GCSE-level students: ‘I found that deeply offensive and complained to have it removed from the syllabus. I felt like saying “Do not talk to me as if I am semi-literate.” It took a while, but it was removed.’

At times, Mr Benton would hear nurses say things like: ‘We are glad you are here – we need a strong man to do this’. He says: ‘For years women have campaigned against those kinds of comments, but now it is women who are making them.’

Some students are taking a stand against discrimination at work, writes Adrian O’Dowd

Jeremy Benton: faced discrimination as an older, male student

Summary

A recent survey of nursing students found that more than half feel discriminated against because of their age, gender, race, disability, or rank in the pecking order.

Key words

Nursing students • Respect • Discrimination • Equal opportunities • Dyslexia
Mr Benton knows a number of colleagues who have faced discrimination because they have dyslexia. ‘It does not worry me because they are aware of their limitations and are trying to overcome them, but the concern is the lack of support there seems to be for them.’

First-year student Amanda Snodgrass has faced problems with her dyslexia at Oxford Brookes University, despite informing her course organisers about her learning difficulty before starting the course. ‘They told me which qualifications I needed and where to get them, so I went to a council facility to have assessments done.’

A mix-up meant that Ms Snodgrass’s assessments were not finished in time. ‘It meant I had to go through my first term without any appropriate help and support,’ she says.

As a result, no consideration was given for the counting and spelling mistakes in her essays. ‘I did not pass my first term and failed a module.’ She has now moved home and is on a three-month waiting list to be reassessed, but she says: ‘By that time, I will have finished my first year. Many tutors and lecturers do not know about or understand dyslexia.’

Grant Ciccone, a third-year nursing student at University of Central England, Birmingham, says he has experienced discrimination as a gay man. ‘The attitude of some of the older members of staff – men and women – has been discriminatory,’ he says. ‘It has been the women more because they come from a position that if a man comes into nursing, there must be something different about him, or he must be gay. It shows itself in the way they speak to me. It is the older generation.’

Mr Ciccone says he has also experienced positive discrimination for being a man, adding: ‘I have been shown skills that other students have not – some people think it is good for the profession to have more male nurses. But that is not fair. All students should be treated in the same way.’

Mr Ciccone says he has not felt the need to take any incident further – he prefers to deal with it himself. ‘I like to address things myself and take the member of staff aside for a quiet word and ask what is going on.’

It has been harder for other people he trained with – in one case a fellow student with ‘gender identity’ issues left the course because of discrimination. The RCN will support any student who feels they are suffering discrimination. Gill Robertson, RCN student adviser, says: ‘There are pockets of discrimination and that is not acceptable. Nursing students are in a vulnerable position – it is difficult for them to challenge things. ‘If more students like these stand up and complain about discrimination, it could become a thing of the past.’

Adrian O’Dowd is a freelance journalist