You don’t have to know the answers to write poetry

The RCN’s first writer in residence, Molly Case, explains how she wants to help visitors to the college’s London HQ explore life events, express painful feelings and reduce stress through creative writing.

It’s a great pleasure to be able to spend the next six months as the RCN’s first ever writer in residence. My role is part of an exciting new project at the RCN Library and Archive called Service Scrapbooks: Nursing, Storytelling and the First World War, which is funded by a £60,600 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The grant will enable the RCN to digitise its collection of nursing scrapbooks from the first world war and create an online resource showcasing the stories of nine nurses who served during the conflict.

The First World War took many ordinary women into extraordinary circumstances, on the front line and at home. Their stories resonate today – many people’s family histories include nurses who served in the war.

By highlighting these stories from the RCN collections, never before made available to the public, the project will allow more people to delve into the lives of these women and acknowledge the incredible commitment of the nursing profession past and present.

People’s stories

I began writing at an early age and studied creative writing and English literature in my degree course in Bath. During that time I was also a care support worker looking after people with dementia. It taught me the importance of listening to those around us – to their
stories, to their history. It also led me to pursue a career in nursing.

I now work as a cardiac nurse at King’s College Hospital in London.

I am hoping this residency will give me a chance to connect and collaborate with people across the UK, inviting people to think about the act of creative writing, especially those who have not thought about it before.

Writers in residence can inhabit many spaces. They can be hosted in theatres, museums, parks, hospitals, libraries and even fish and chip shops.

They offer a unique perspective and insight into the creative process and can inspire people to...
> pick up a pen and write themselves.

Around the world many medical schools have established programmes to support artists in residence.

Human experience

Poetry comes from human experience. As nurses we encounter people at their most vulnerable and experiencing times that are traumatic, life-changing, life-affirming and memorable. We often look after people ‘in extremis’, as the award-winning poet Fiona Sampson pointed out.

Professor Sampson explained that she would write a poem and conjure up the people she had met in mental health settings, in hospitals and in prisons in order to gauge the effectiveness and relevance of her work – would these people, who had experienced the most raw layers of human experience, be moved by it?

Writing poetry can improve mood, reduce stress, help people to explore life events, express and resolve painful feelings, or simply act as a distraction from the monotony or worries of daily life. In my role I will be running workshops, talking to people about what they have discovered, and supporting visitors to write their own poems.

We have set up a visible area in the library space that makes it clear I am there to interact with visitors. We have acquired a vintage typewriter, which I’m hoping will be a useful tool for me and for visitors, and we will pin the results – whether it be an idea, the beginnings of a poem, a rhyme or a fully formed haiku – onto the corkboard for others to read.

When teaching and talking about poetry, I have found people are shy about the notion of writing something themselves. They will say: ‘I have written before, but it’s not really anything.’ Or they are quick to clarify: ‘I’m certainly not a poet.’

Free from judgement

The library space will be friendly and entirely free from judgement.

Professor Sampson has said that we have a ‘lack of confidence about poetry in society in general’. For many, this may have originated at school – some teachers seem unaware that poetry transcends the classroom.

The American poet Lucille Clifton said: ‘We’re beginning to remember that the first poets didn’t come out of a classroom, that poetry began when somebody walked off of a savanna or out of a cave and looked up at the sky with wonder and said, “Ahhh”. That was the first poem.’

It’s true. Anybody who wonders should write poetry. It is not necessarily for those who know the answers.

Molly Case is a cardiac nurse, published poet and spoken word artist

Visit Molly at the RCN Library and Archive, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0RN every Wednesday until November 2017 (except August)

Find out more: call 0345 337 3368, email rcn.library@rcn.org.uk or go to www.rcn.org.uk/library

‘Writing poetry can improve mood, reduce stress, help people express painful feelings, or simply act as a distraction from daily life’

Molly Case, pictured