The anger nurses feel about this year's pay debate hasn't lessened in the weeks since the award was announced. Hundreds gathered for a rally in Leeds last week, as less than a mile away the staff and management side were deadlocked on national negotiations. Meanwhile, many more trusts declared their intention to pay above the national 1 per cent, but there are conditions attached to most. And as we hurtle towards April 1 it looks inevitable that nurses will have to wait for any extra increase while unions at the centre continue to negotiate over the issue. It's a measure of how demoralised and undervalued nurses feel that they have persisted in campaigning hard for the full 3 per cent rise.

It is against that backdrop that we launch Nursing Standard's annual awards. The Nurse 95 Awards always run with the byline – recognising and rewarding excellence. But they aren't aimed at the high fliers. Sometimes the word 'excellence' becomes inextricably linked with the profession's elite, whereas many nurses are delivering care that surpasses expectations. There is no mystic in how to be successful in these awards – they are aimed at ordinary nurses who have achieved extraordinary things in the course of their work. There are so many unsung heroes in nursing, so many women and men who daily strive to ensure that they provide the best possible care to their patients and clients. There are nurses, who in addition to their full time jobs, devote their own personal time and energy to provide additional support and help to patients. Nurses, who despite many obstacles achieve changes in the way care is delivered. They convince managers that change will be cost effective, medical colleagues that it will not tread on their territories and fellow nurses that the extra work involved in implementing change will make their jobs better.

These nurses are often completely unaware of how remarkable their achievements are. They are often reluctant to put themselves forward as individuals who are worthy of praise, so ingrained is their sense of teamwork. Often the entries received for the nursing awards are littered with references to the efforts of others. There is a humility about nurses which is rarely found in other workers. Working hard purely to get to the top is an alien culture in nursing. Nurses who do work hard and achieve success are usually reticent about taking the credit for their own achievements.

At a time when nurses feel that rewards are few and far between, the Nurse 95 Awards attempt to redress the balance to some extent. And it's not only about the accolade and the financial reward. Throughout the award process nurses who have been shortlisted are continually featured in the national and local press. They provide positive reinforcement to the public and the media of the tremendous work nurses are involved in. And on the evening of the awards nursing displays its talents to some of the most influential people in health care and politics. Year on year, the award winners capture the very essence of modern nursing and drive home the reality of nurses' worth and work. Last year's winners received unprecedented levels of media coverage – there are few other opportunities that allow nursing to influence perceptions the way these awards do.

The pay campaign has brought home the importance of the massive public support nurses enjoy. Through positive portrayal of nursing through initiatives like Nurse 95 the public will continue to back nurses in their time of need and share a fuller understanding of their value to the health services.

Norah Casey, Editor.