‘Be curious and always show compassion’

Research director Professor Tanya McCance on embedding person-centred care in practice across different settings

By Kimberley Hackett
Assistant editor
@kj_hackett

What is your job?
Research director at the institute of nursing and health research, Ulster University. I provide strategic leadership to ensure our research is of the highest quality, and makes an impact across health and social care.

Why did you become a nurse?
I wanted to be a nurse and care for people at their most vulnerable for as long as I can remember. As a nurse, I have had a fabulous career and often give thanks for having a job I love.

Where did you train?
I am a graduate nurse and undertook my bachelor of nursing degree at the University of Ulster from 1984-1990, when this was not a commonly chosen pathway for nurse training. It was an immense learning experience and an opportunity to work in many different healthcare organisations across Northern Ireland.

Why did you specialise in research?
I started working in research at an early stage in my career and the main influencing factor was my decision to undertake an MSc in nursing at Edinburgh University. At this point I became aware of the potential of nursing research to generate new knowledge that could make a difference to patients and their families.

You received an RCN outstanding achievement award for your research. What does the research involve?
Development of person-centred care has been the focus of my work for nearly two decades. At the heart of my research is the development of the person-centred practice theoretical framework, which has become an international recognised model for nursing. The framework moves person-centredness from a policy position to a standard that is achievable across healthcare settings. It enables nurses and other team members to recognise important elements in practice, draw on relevant data, and implement and evaluate improvements in practice that lead to a more dignified and compassionate culture of care.

What nursing achievement makes you most proud?
I remember getting my first competitive research grant, from Action Cancer, a charity in Northern Ireland. It was for £10,000 and I thought I had won the lottery. Securing funding remains challenging for all nurse researchers and when you are successful, it is a time to celebrate.

What are the challenges for nursing?
We are living in a time of constant change with significant demographic, social and economic factors affecting nursing practice. The challenge is how we can develop the nursing workforce in this context to be flexible and resilient so we can make a positive contribution to the experience of care.

What are the specific challenges for nurse researchers?
While we have made progress in building research capacity in nursing, the biggest challenge for nurse researchers is the limited number of career opportunities integrating practice and research.

Outside work, what do you enjoy?
I love the outdoors, whether on water or up mountain, but spending time with my two teenage children is what I enjoy the most.

What advice would you give to a newly qualified nurse?
Never lose sight of people as individuals with their own unique life histories and experiences. Be curious about people, listen to their stories, don’t be afraid to ask them important questions and always show them compassion.