I tell overseas nurses ‘you can do it’ – I did

Gamu Mhizha, who came from Zimbabwe to England to train, encourages all internationally recruited nurses to aim high

Internationally recruited nurses can feel overwhelmed when they first arrive in the UK but, at a Northamptonshire trust, one nurse has lived experience of what it takes to help them settle in.

‘They are coming from different healthcare systems, they don’t know the etiquette, and this is a foreign world to them. They can feel afraid,’ says Gamu Mhizha, who is originally from Zimbabwe but came to the Midlands in 2003 to study nursing at the University of Wolverhampton.

Return to practice approach

At Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, those with a nursing qualification from their country of origin take part in the international return to practice programme. This involves supporting them to complete a Nursing and Midwifery Council-approved exam, the Objective Structured Clinical Examination, at Northampton University. Following this training, the trust has achieved a 100% success rate, gaining more than 78 nurses.

‘They may have doubted themselves, but they also know they’ve had to go through many hoops to get here,’ says Ms Mhizha. ‘This is the last stage before they get on the register. I tell them, you can do it.’

As one of the largest employers in the country, with almost 1,200 registered nurses, the acute healthcare trust has recruited people from almost every country in the world.

‘Having such diverse international staff is one of the major reasons why Kettering is so unique,’ says Ms Mhizha. ‘We’re welcoming here. It’s a family and people smile and say hello to each other – whether they’re a porter, a nurse or a director.

‘You can also feel you’re progressing your career. I’m a nurse manager, so when others look at me, they can think it’s possible.’

From qualifying to developing others

After qualifying in 2007, Ms Mhizha joined the trust the following year, first working on a respiratory ward before moving to a short-stay assessment unit.

In 2016, she moved into education as a clinical skills and simulation facilitator, helping medical students gain vital skills such as cannulation and venepuncture.

‘Having such diverse international staff is one of the major reasons why Kettering is so unique. We’re welcoming here. It’s a family’

Gamu Mhizha, ward sister at Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust who helped set up the trust’s network for staff from BAME backgrounds

From the outset, she was keen to have a simulation lab, as she knew it would transform education for multiprofessional teams.

She and the education team explored what other organisations had done to achieve this, and then created a business case to make it happen.

Ms Mhizha’s efforts came to fruition last year when the new facility opened, with funding from Health Education England.

‘It looks like a real ward, with everything you need to develop your clinical skills, including a range of mannequins,’ explains Ms Mhizha. ‘Students are able to practise in a controlled environment, rather than on a patient. It also means they can learn from errors.’

Leading the way

In February 2018, she became ward sister on a medical assessment unit and she hopes to start a master’s degree soon, having already completed leadership courses, including the NHS Leadership Academy’s Stepping Up development programme, for aspiring black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) healthcare staff.

‘I’m looking at different career pathways, and to achieve my goals I need experience of governance,’ she says.
‘I want to be a chief nursing officer one day, but to get there I need the tools.’

In 2018, Ms Mhizha helped to set up the trust’s network for staff from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, which meets quarterly.

“We need a platform to discuss common issues and find ways of empowering each other, making sure our voices are heard,” says Ms Mhizha.

The group also organises social activities to enable people to integrate and settle into communities.

Cultural engagement
Among the issues they hope to tackle is the need for longer time off for overseas nursing staff who are visiting relatives back home.

“You’re not going on holiday. It can be difficult for some people, especially those who have to travel for several days,” she says.

For Ms Mhizha, diversity is strength. ‘For the hospital and the NHS, having such a diverse workforce brings in a wealth of knowledge from people who have lived in different situations and societies. ‘We all share one calling – to work for the health service,’ she says.

Overcoming prejudice
‘The world is small now and many of our patients are from different countries or have visited them. We can engage better with them and their different cultures.’

But sadly, prejudice is an enduring reality. ‘Racism is an unfortunate thing about the world,’ says Ms Mhizha.

‘It’s become subtle and a lot of it is based on plain ignorance. Someone may say, do you speak African? It’s like asking if you speak European.’

Understanding each other’s backgrounds is crucial, she believes.

‘I would advise people to get to know their colleagues and their culture first, before they make assumptions,’ says Ms Mhizha.

‘For example, I once had a manager who said that I must be hiding something because when I spoke to them, I always looked down. I had to explain that, in my culture, if you’re my elder or my boss, I lower my eyes as a mark of respect.’

Proposed £36,000 salary threshold for migrants ‘should not apply to nurses’

‘Many of our patients are from different countries. We can engage better with them and their different cultures’

Ms Mhizha

LOOKING FOR CPD HOURS OR A NEW JOB?

Hundreds of job opportunities for nurses of all levels, and HCAs at the RCNi Nursing Careers & Jobs Fair – the UK’s largest FREE nursing career development event

• Meet employers looking to fill immediate vacancies
• Attend FREE CPD-accredited seminars and workshops on preceptorship, career development, and more
• Complete CPD hours at our learning zone
• Hear a panel talk by nurse leaders
• Enter competitions to win exciting prizes

5 OCTOBER 2019
HILTON BRIGHTON METROPOLE

SUPPORTED BY
NursingStandard

Info and register
www.careersandjobsfair.com