‘I had no idea how far this award would take me’

RCN Nurse of the Year Taurai Matare reflects on her first 100 days in the role that has put her specialty in the spotlight

By Taurai Matare

I didn’t realise what a huge thing it was nationally and internationally to be the RCN Nurse of the Year, but in the first 100 days after winning the award, I’ve been networking with nurses around the UK and the world, and from all specialties.

I met the prime minister when he came to my workplace, Whipps Cross Hospital in London, and I’ve been invited to present my work in England and abroad. All of this has really put the specialty I am so passionate about – ophthalmology – in the spotlight.

Winning the award took quite a while to sink in. The day of the awards ceremony in July was brilliant.

I loved the finalists’ briefing before the ceremony, where we all got to know each other. It was a great opportunity to network, exchange numbers and find out what other nurses are up to all around the UK.

I met nurses I’d heard about

The ceremony in London was out of this world. It was fantastic to be sitting on a table with my chief nurse and I was introduced to so many senior nurse leaders that I had heard about but never had a chance to meet.

My first surprise was when I won the leadership category; I thought, ‘What? Little old me?’.

The ceremony culminated with the announcement of the overall winner, chosen from all the category winners.

Far from expecting to win, I already had my purse on my lap ready to pop back to my room to get ready for the dancing. But, having been an RCN member for 25 years, first I wanted to hear the president speak.

At the end of her speech she announced the winner – when I heard my name, I nearly passed out! It was an amazing night. Even when I returned my room I did not sleep, with all my family texting and calling.

I thought it would quieten down after that night, but it hasn’t. I was invited to speak at a conference in Leicester and at two sessions of the Australian ophthalmology nursing conference.

Next year is the global ophthalmology conference in Singapore, where I have also been invited to present. It will offer me the chance to network with...
nurse leaders from the World Health Organization and link with ophthalmic nurses from around the world.

Here at home, so many hospitals and ophthalmology teams want to visit our unit and see what we do.

When the prime minister Boris Johnson came to see me, that was something else. We had a one-to-one meeting and I was surprised that he had read all about my work and how I had developed our service, bringing together separate eye casualty, outpatients and theatres to create a single, modern eye treatment centre on one site.

People from as far away as Australia have contacted me to say they have read about me. I never expected my work would be spread around the world – I’ve had to come in to work early some days to beat the time differences to talk to people.

Being the RCN Nurse of the Year has raised my profile at our trust. The chief executive came to see me and I recently met the board chairman after being invited to his Barts Heroes lunch; I was chuffed to be introduced and my achievements announced. Important visitors to the trust are brought to see me and I can show them our unit.

The recognition this award brings has made so many people interested in working at our unit.
staff retention is so good, no one has left for two years.
That means we don’t have any vacancies in our unit at the moment, but now have a waiting list of people who have phoned to see if there are any roles available, having seen the video that RCNi made about me or read about what we do here.
Healthcare support workers have contacted me asking if we have any ophthalmic technician vacancies, as they have read that they will be developed and valued here and will have a career pathway. Some have offered to work on a voluntary basis to start accessing those development opportunities and be in with a chance if something does become available.
There have been so many drop-ins that the chief executive has suggested we hold an open day so people can come and see what we do.

Raising the profile of my work
We also have patients coming from as far as Southend and Brighton, bypassing so many other hospitals, as they have heard that we are a great unit.
So many colleagues have emailed and phoned to congratulate me on flying the flag for ophthalmology. I love being able to raise its profile as a nursing career and we have definitely put it right up there in our trust.
Recently I enjoyed my first meeting as a new member of the RCNi editorial advisory board. As a member, I will help shape the content in RCNi’s online and print journals and have already had the chance to meet nurse colleagues from different disciplines.
I also presented my work at the recent RCNi Nursing Careers and Jobs Fair in London – wow, what a huge event! As well as presenting, it was great for networking and I left having exchanged emails and numbers with so many colleagues. Lots of people wanted to know how they could replicate what I had done.
The trust is going to give me the opportunity to do a PhD, something I have always wanted to do.
I became a nurse because my mother was a nurse. Sadly, she has passed away, but I know she would be very proud. My family have been so excited and happy, and so proud – like me, they never dreamed I would achieve something like this.
I would absolutely recommend nurses enter the RCNi Nurse Awards. Submit your nominations – this title has such great perks! You get to have so many experiences you would never have dreamed of and meet so many people you would never have otherwise. For me, it has been life-changing.

Taurai Matare, RCN Nurse of the Year 2019, is a matron at Whipps Cross Hospital in London

Find out about upcoming RCNi Nursing Careers and Jobs Fairs
careersandjobsfair.com

How to enter the RCNi Nurse Awards
Entries are now open for the RCNi Nurse Awards 2020. The awards celebrate the best in nursing across the UK, from innovative projects to inspiring examples of patient care.
The recognition gained as a finalist or winner can be a huge career boost; many past winners have gone on to realise further remarkable achievements and become national influencers in nursing.
What better year to enter or nominate a colleague than in 2020, the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife?
Entries must be submitted by Friday 17 January 2020, and the winners will be announced at a ceremony in London on 8 July.
Enter now at nurseawards.co.uk