For Liam Barnes, his cousin, nurse Laura Hyde, was the closest thing he had to a sister. After graduating in 2011, Ms Hyde became a naval nurse, combining her two passions: travel and caring for others. ‘Laura wanted to explore the world, she was a keen traveller, which working for the navy allowed her to do,’ says Mr Barnes. ‘Laura was probably the most selfless person you’d ever come across. She was passionate about caring for people.’

The signs were not picked up
On 4 August 2016, at 27 years old, Ms Hyde died by suicide. Her aunt, mental health nurse and occupational health specialist Jennifer Hawkins, says Ms Hyde’s suicide came completely out of the blue. ‘It was unexpected, there were no real signs,’ she says. ‘After the inquest we heard that things weren’t quite right but they hadn’t been picked up.’

Sadly, Ms Hyde’s case is not an isolated one. She is one of 51 nurses known to have died in 2016 by suicide or ‘undetermined intent’ in England and Wales, according to the Office for National Statistics. The same data show that between 2011 and 2017,
Nurse Laura Hyde died by suicide in 2016, aged 27

305 nurses are known, or suspected, to have died in similar circumstances.

Well-being initiatives
Determined that no other person or family should go through what they had, Mr Barnes, Ms Hawkins and their family set up the Laura Hyde Foundation in her memory.

The foundation provides mental health support to medical and emergency services professionals.

In 2018 the foundation provided grants to NHS trusts for well-being initiatives and mental health support for individuals. It also created and ran mental health seminars at 14 NHS organisations, and worked on a paper on mental health improvement techniques relevant to the sector.

‘We wanted to do something in Laura’s name, something consistent with the values she had: her selflessness and ability to look after others,’ Mr Barnes says. ‘But also take the lessons from her experience and make sure other people don’t have to go through what we went through.’

‘Most of the time, people in the NHS won’t admit they need support because they feel that it’s going to be judged as a bit of a weakness’
Jennifer Hawkins, clinical lead at the Laura Hyde Foundation, mental health nurse and occupational health specialist

When the foundation website went live in 2017, it received 11,000 hits in the first week, which told Mr Barnes there was a definite need for its service.

Building on local success
The foundation is based in south west England, where Ms Hyde was from, and has already helped health professionals there.

“We’ve helped about 350 nurses and doctors in Derriford as part of the well-being programme we’ve helped establish there,” says Mr Barnes.

On the back of its local success, the foundation is now focusing on helping NHS staff and emergency workers across the UK. “We’ve been in contact with about 3,500 NHS staff across the country,” Mr Barnes says.

The foundation also has a number of ‘charity champions’. These are friends of Laura’s who work in the sector, who provide support to front-line staff and raise mental health-related issues at management level.

Ms Hawkins is the charity’s clinical lead and says nurses and other NHS staff still feel that admitting they need support will have negative consequences.

‘Most of the time, people in the NHS won’t do that because they feel that it’s going to be judged as a bit of a weakness in their career,’ she says.

She believes NHS managers need mental health support training to help understand the risk factors.

Identifying those at risk
‘Managers should know which members of staff go home to an empty house, those that don’t have support at home,’ she says.

‘Ask them that question – “How are you doing after a difficult day? Are you okay to go home?” – but these types of conversations are just not happening.’

However, Ms Hawkins adds that it is not just managers who need to have these conversations and urges nurses to look after each other.

‘You need to be concerned about your colleagues – make

Where to go if you need help

» RCN members can get free, confidential support and assistance to deal with personal and work-related issues. The RCN counselling service is available 8.30am–8.30pm, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Call 0345 772 6100, or go to rcn.org.uk/counselling

» The Samaritans offers a safe place to talk any time, including about job-related stress or anxiety. Call free on 116 123, or go to samaritans.org
Charity champion: ‘I don’t want anyone to be another statistic’

Kirsty Keenan, a critical care and trauma senior nurse at Derriford Hospital and lecturer at Plymouth University, on her decision to become a Laura Hyde Foundation charity champion:

‘Laura was one of my closest friends and my first friend when I moved to Devon, 500 miles away from home. She welcomed me with open arms from day one and I knew she was a friend for life.

‘When I lost her due to mental health issues, it was clear that the right level of tailored support simply wasn’t available and I knew something had to change immediately.’

Ms Keenan says becoming a charity champion with the foundation enabled her to help direct other professionals to appropriate help.

‘As a charity champion I work my hardest to spread the word about the Laura Hyde Foundation at the hospital and within the multidisciplinary team, working closely with the nurses, doctors and paramedics.

‘Every life lost is heart-breaking for friends, family and colleagues,’ she adds.

‘It is never inevitable and we must redouble our efforts to support nursing staff.’

NHS Employers chief executive Danny Mortimer says employers should adopt the recommendations of Health Education England’s NHS staff and learners’ mental well-being report. The report, released this year, lists 33 recommendations to improve mental health and post-trauma support for NHS staff and students.

Growing demands

Mr Mortimer says with pressures on nurses increasing, the suicide figures highlight the importance of positive workplace cultures, supportive teams and management.

‘Demands on our nursing teams have grown because of the dependency of our patients, as well as the disinvestment in other public services, particularly social care,’ he says. ‘This is exacerbated by the profound mismatch between the need for and availability of staff, particularly nurses.’

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson says plans are already in development to offer better mental health support to staff.

‘As we deliver the ten-year plan, the NHS will shortly set out its response to recommendations to improve mental health support for staff, including access to a dedicated confidential helpline and fast-tracked referral scheme, so that anyone struggling gets the help they need,’ the spokesperson says.