

RCN Connect's achievements

Since RCN Connect began in August 2000, over 500 RCN members across all regions have attended over 60 meetings, workshops, seminars, conferences, focus groups, exhibitions, jobs fairs and other events as part of the programme.

When RCN Connect began, the number of black and ethnic minority stewards in the RCN across the West Midlands did not reflect the ethnic make-up of the region. The primary objective for RCN Connect, therefore, was to increase the number of black and ethnic minority activists. Increased numbers were achieved by raising awareness of cultural and ethnic diversity through RCN Connect's networking approach, working with the many different groups involved in diversity issues.

Extra benefits have resulted from RCN Connect's work. The RCN now has a high profile and a key role in the development of the employment, training and economic strategy of the West Midlands region through its participation in the Health and Care Taskforce. The RCN is also represented on the Birmingham Strategic Health Authority, and is strongly involved in promoting nursing as a career in schools and acts as a pivot for mediating communication between different groups, Trusts and employers across the region.

From the outset RCN Connect in the West Midlands forged strong links with Birmingham City Council to place nursing and the expertise and experience of nurses from ethnically diverse backgrounds at the centre of the city's employment and regeneration strategy. As RCN Connect developed, it worked increasingly closely with educators, Trusts, employer organisations, local councils and businesses as well as community groups.

In London the objectives of black and ethnic minority members, who make up one in four RCN members in London, were different. The RCN London Equality Network was already well established as a focus for professional development and support for black and ethnic minority nurses. However, the history of racial discrimination across the NHS in London and the barriers to promotion faced by black and ethnic minority nurses meant that the priority for RCN Connect in London was to enable black and ethnic minority members to realise their potential in the RCN and in their workplaces.

The visibility of black and ethnic minority nurses was raised by giving all RCN members of the London Equality Network access to media training. A "Get That Job"

workshop brought together black and ethnic minority RCN members to examine the process of applying for promotion in the light of potential discrimination, equipping applicants with the knowledge and confidence to achieve their career goals.

As a result the visibility and stature of black and ethnic minority RCN members in London has grown. An increasing number of industrial tribunal cases of racial discrimination are being lodged. RCN Connect provides a framework for black and ethnic minority nurses to develop confidence and access support to pursue cases.

The reality and the vision

Research* shows that there is an over-representation of nurses from black and minority ethnic communities working at the lower nursing grades – C, D and E. The reasons for this cannot be fully accounted for in terms of skills, qualifications or experience. The same research showed that black nurses have greater difficulty in gaining promotion.

The NHS has policies in place to tackle racism and develop equality and diversity in the health service. The Human Resources strategies of all four countries acknowledge the need to promote diversity and eliminate discrimination. The General Whitley Council equal opportunities policy has been updated and provides a structure for NHS employees to implement human resources practices that promote positive diversity. RCN Connect was established in order to support black and ethnic minority RCN members in gaining maximum benefit from these initiatives.

The Future

RCN Connect has created an environment in which the RCN can work towards developing separate but complementing strategies to overcome discrimination and raise the profile of ethnic diversity in nursing and the community.

* Nursing in a Multi-Ethnic NHS: Policy Studies Institute: 1995