‘IT IS AN ENORMOUS PRIVILEGE TO BE WITH PEOPLE AT THE END OF LIFE’

Nurses at a London hospice explain to Frances Pickersgill the satisfaction they derive from supporting dying patients

St Joseph’s Hospice in Hackney, east London, is a beacon of compassion in a relatively deprived part of the capital. Opened in 1905 by the Religious Sisters of Charity, the hospice has expanded gradually and now provides inpatient, community and day care, as well as outpatient clinics and respite care to more than 1,700 people with life-limiting conditions.

Lead nurse for the inpatient unit Mary Flatley runs three wards, two of which are for terminally ill patients and those needing symptom control, together with a respite unit that gives patients or their carer a break from circumstances at home such as loneliness.

‘Patients come here because hospital care is no longer appropriate for them,’ says Ms Flatley, who worked in the NHS as a ward manager until she came to St Joseph’s four years ago.

‘I stay because it is an enormous privilege to be with people at the end of their lives – it is one of the most rewarding roles in nursing.’

Ms Flatley is clear that selecting the right staff is the key to delivering excellent care. ‘Staff must be able to face difficult and distressing issues, so team support is important,’ she says.

‘Some staff immediately see the enormity of what can be achieved here.

‘Professional supervision is available for all staff, we have regular Schwartz rounds and there is a confidential staff support system.’

Children’s nursing

The RCN’s children and young people’s nursing conference, Advocating for Children in a Rapidly Changing World, will be joined with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health conference at the ICC Birmingham on April 28-29. The programme includes symposia and workshops, keynote speakers from diverse professional backgrounds, updates on clinical issues, paediatric science and an extensive abstract programme. tinyurl.com/RCNCYPRCPCH

ANZAC nurses

Nurse historian Christine Hallett will be leading a small voyage on the MS Serenissima from Athens to Istanbul to commemorate nursing sisters who cared for the sick and wounded in the Gallipoli campaign of the first world war. The trip, from August 31 to September 7, will include a visit to Moudros Harbour on Lemnos, the Allied headquarters of the campaign and the sites of the Australian, Canadian and British hospitals. tinyurl.com/ANZAChistorytrip

Surgical care

Friends of African Nursing (FOAN), a UK-based charity that supports surgical nursing education in Africa, has published online modules to help more nurses deliver safer surgical care. FOAN provides perioperative and leadership education in ten countries. Initially, three modules will be available, but more will be added. Kenya, the Seychelles and Ghana will pilot the modules, and senior nurses in those countries will...
Eleazar Manausi trained in the Philippines and moved to the UK when a recruitment agency came looking for stroke nurses. ‘A friend introduced me to palliative care at St Joseph’s. There is no palliative care in the Philippines; I had never heard of it before so it was quite a surprise for me,’ says Mr Manausi.

Close-knit community
‘I have stayed for ten years and this isn’t unusual here. Many nurses have been here 20 or 30 years, which shows how close-knit this community is. ‘My main satisfaction is that we can make a difference. To you it might seem a small thing, but to the patient and to their family small things make a difference.’

Staff nurse Kate Hambleton has worked in the inpatient unit for almost four years, caring mainly for patients with cancer.

‘I worked on a stroke unit at St Thomas’ Hospital that involved palliative care, an area that really interested me. But I wanted a more holistic approach in a specialist environment,’ she explains.

‘The hospice holds many seminars and update sessions. Hands-on patient care gives me the most job satisfaction,’ says Ms Hambleton. ‘Patients and their families express great appreciation, which makes the job worthwhile.

Ms Hambleton says staff have more time than in acute settings, so the care feels more holistic. ‘I can do the things I want to do as a nurse. I stay here because of the patients.’

Inpatient ward sister Susan Fidler cares for patients with cancer, dementia, heart failure and motor neurone disease. ‘Every patient is different so the work is always challenging and nurses are always learning new things,’ she says.

‘People think hospices are only about end of life care, but there are so many areas to learn about.

‘I used to be a manager of a leukaemia ward and I came to enjoy palliative care. Someone told me about an advert for St Joseph’s and I thought maybe I would take a sideways move. It was a good change in my career.

‘Staffing levels are excellent here, retention is better, staff stay longer. Many staff just want to look after patients and give them time’

Hospice nursing in the community
Like her hospice colleagues at St Joseph’s, community team manager Geraldine Barry is always looking for more nurses with motivation and drive who are knowledgeable, adaptable and able to communicate with a range of different professionals.

‘Community hospice nurses have a important role in cutting through bureaucracy,’ says Ms Barry. St Joseph’s nurse consultant Nigel Dodds agrees: ‘The London boroughs we work with are pioneering integrated care. This means we need specialist nurses to work closely with health and social care teams to support as many people as possible. Specialist nurses cannot and do not need to have direct contact with all people in the last years of life.

‘Instead we can help community nurses and social care workers to develop the skills they need.’ Ms Barry says the hospice has now introduced band 6 nurse practitioners. ‘They have responsibilities for case management; skills that nurses acquire in hospital and now are learning to apply in the community. Also, newly qualified nurses are starting their first jobs in the community and that presents a challenge for us.’