



My RCN Journey

2007-2015

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My RCN journey

This is a reflective account of my time as CEO/General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing. I wish to share the lessons learnt with a view to providing the readers with an account of how by working as a team, organisations that have major issues can overcome even the most challenging of difficulties.

I certainly learnt from the experience which ultimately, I found enriching, I hope others will find the lessons learnt of benefit to them.

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Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing is in a unique position to be the voice of nursing and shape the future healthcare agenda. When I joined the College as Chief Executive and General Secretary in January 2007 it was a challenged organisation with a limited public profile, in serious financial trouble.

With a declining income from membership and a staff pension scheme running at a £43 million deficit, the pressure on scant reserves and a growing gap between income and expenditure posed a real risk of bankruptcy.

In accepting the role, it was clear to me that some tough and unpopular decisions would be needed to stabilise the RCN's current position and secure its future. The challenge I set myself was to leave the organisation in a stronger position than I found it.

In fact, by the time I left the RCN in August 2015, its fortunes had been turned around, with membership at an all-time high, a new affordable pension scheme, an enviable media profile and reserves of £70 million.

This document is my personal record of my tenure at the RCN and a reflection on the actions I led with others to revive its failing fortunes, in the expectation that it will have a place in the next version of the organisation's history.

I hope that the progress we made and the lessons we learned will not be lost or forgotten at this important time for the organisation and the standing of the profession. The achievements of which I am most proud were to:

- secure the long-term financial sustainability of the RCN.
- ensure that decisions were taken and funds spent in the best interests of our membership.
- implement the governance, management and internal controls, and cultural changes appropriate for an organisation of the RCN's stature, size and complexity.
- build the College's reputation and its influence with opinion-formers and decision-makers.

A challenging job offer.

When I was invited by head-hunters Odgers Berndtson to apply for the role of RCN General Secretary in the summer of 2006, my first reaction was to decline. I was in my twelfth year as CEO of the Central & North West London NHS Trust (CNWL) and things were going well. The Healthcare Commission had given us the highest rating of a three-star Trust; we had won several major awards for standards of care and innovation; and the Secretary of State had just approved our application for Foundation Trust status.

This had been a wonderful time in my career, and it was a big decision to move away from the team we had built and the reputation we had established. However, I was finally persuaded to apply.

What partly attracted me to the post, were the huge challenges involved, which became increasingly apparent in the lead-up to my interview.

The most immediate challenges were financial. Membership was dropping and expenditure exceeding income, while the final salary pension scheme was in big trouble, with a £43 million deficit.

The RCN's preferred solution to these problems – announced before my interview – was to raise additional funds through the sale of its headquarters in London's Cavendish Square. However, this proposal had been strongly opposed by the membership and the resulting conflict had generated considerable trade and mainstream media coverage.

My own view was that selling the College's principal asset was an ill-conceived idea that would not have resolved its financial problems in the long term, and that it would be more fruitful to focus on replacing the unaffordable pension scheme.

At my interview, before a panel of 11 people, I set out two conditions for accepting the job to make sure the Council fully understood that things had to change dramatically if the RCN was to survive.

The first was that the existing final salary pension scheme had to close, even though this would lead to opposition from the staff and would initially attract negative publicity, particularly in the nursing press.

The second condition was that the College needed to place itself in the vanguard of health policy modernisation and development rather than maintaining what was perceived at times to be a reactionary mindset.

This is not the way you normally set out your stall to an appointments committee - but the next day they offered me the job.

I must admit that had I understood the true extent of the challenges ahead of me, I would probably not have taken it. Running a large NHS Trust, serving a

significant area of London and providing a range of specialist services, was easy by comparison with the formidable challenges I now faced.

Before taking up my appointment I attended the RCN's Annual General Meeting in October 2006, in Cardiff. Although members made me very welcome, with much handshaking and genuine warmth and well-wishing, I was aware of a problem at the heart of the organisation. When the Chair of Council came under huge pressure to respond to interventions from members, there was no overt support from any of the executive team.

At one stage I was tapped on the shoulder by a past President of the College, a longstanding member who was one of the principal opponents to the sale of the Cavendish Square headquarters.

She whispered – and her words resonate as clearly today as they did at the time – 'This is a dysfunctional organisation'. How right she was!

First impressions

Initially I found the workings of the RCN impenetrable. It was difficult to get answers to the many questions I inevitably had, and it quickly became apparent that the Executive and the Council co-existed in a state of mutual mistrust and, in many ways, disrespect.

Council saw the Executive as a law unto themselves, failing to recognise the RCN's position as a member-led organisation. For their part some of the executives thought the Council simply did not understand the challenges involved in managing such a large and complex body.

It became abundantly clear that I needed to repair and rebuild the relationship between the two and ensure that both sides understood that while the organisation was member-led it was not member-managed.

Strengthening the team

My first priority was to get the executive team working as a corporate body. I was fortunate to have inherited some hugely talented people, but the College was operating in a federated way with a lack of understanding that we were all part of a single organisation and could be working much more effectively and efficiently for our members.

I was in the fortunate position of being able to recruit a new Director of Finance, and the appointee, Tim Golbourn, gave me brilliant support and he continued to ensure good financial stewardship of the College until he left in January 2021. I also had a vacancy in the office in Scotland and was delighted to appoint Theresa Fyffe, that was advantageous to the College as a whole, not just Scotland.

My next step was to work on improving communications both within the College and externally. I decided to institute an executive team brief every Monday morning, with everyone attending either in person or by teleconference. The idea was for team members to review their previous week's work, talk through upcoming issues and receive updates on current hot topics. It was an approach that had served me well at the CNWL Trust.

The reaction to this initiative was interesting and highlighted the cultural change that was needed. Although most senior managers welcomed the move, there was push back from a few, and some found it difficult to accept that I was implementing the change without negotiation.

To strengthen the team, I brought two key players onto the Board: head of communications, Amanda Callaghan, a highly skilled and under-utilised individual, and head of governance, Jane Clarke, an immensely talented person who was a major force in helping to modernise the College.

Solving the pension problem

Two days into the job I had a conversation with the Chair of Council and the President. As discussed at my interview, I intended to stop all work on selling the HQ and concentrate instead on consulting on ways to close the final salary pension scheme.

I do not for one moment criticise the Council for their decision to sell Cavendish Square to resolve the pension deficit. Although some Council members have had long and distinguished nursing careers with senior management experience, most Council members had not and, when advised to sell by the Executive, they were unable to see a viable alternative.

It quickly became clear that some of the Executive and their direct reports had little interest in closing the scheme, from which they all stood to benefit. When I explained my rationale, most were supportive, but it was clear that I would have to front the operation.

Final salary pension schemes require a constant flow of income derived from employer and employee contributions and investment returns. On retirement, the pension is not just guaranteed, based on final salary, but index-linked and payable in perpetuity, regardless of investment performance. In 2007, people who had retired 30 years earlier were drawing pensions far more than the salary they were earning at retirement.

The mathematics of the scheme simply didn't add up, especially as any shortfall in contributions or investment returns gave rise to a deficit that had to be met by the employer. The Pensions Regulator, through the scheme trustees, had for some time been pressing the RCN to resolve the issue. In 2006 the pension scheme deficit was as I have said was £43 million – and growing. This had led to a negative balance sheet for the organisation and a real risk of bankruptcy.

The idea to remedy the situation by selling Cavendish Square was a flawed one, not least because it is leased and not owned by the College. There was talk of relocating out of London, possibly to Slough, but this would have involved buying or leasing a building large enough to house a 100 plus staff and the library and conference facilities. Quite apart from the fact that many staff would be unable to relocate, leading to redundancy costs as well as lost expertise.

On top of that, the sale and relocation would have done nothing to stem the cash flow drain of rising pension contributions plus those required to pay off the deficit.

My strategy to consult on options for closing the scheme, based on independent actuarial advice, took the form of a 'road show', touring the regional offices in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as Cardiff Gate which houses a large number of support staff, the RCN Nursing Institute in Oxford, the RCN's publishing subsidiary and, of course, the staff at HQ.

As a new leader who had yet to meet many of the staff, telling people that the final salary pension scheme would have to close was not the ideal way to introduce myself, even though it was made clear that any replacement scheme would still guarantee benefits accrued to the point of closure. However, on a very positive note, it was great to meet colleagues face to face and learn more about regions and country workings. It was also an opportunity to build good working relations.

In the end the meetings went well, reinforcing my long-held view that if you wish to implement change you have to develop a clear supporting narrative and work through issues by giving people the opportunity to ask questions and make sense of the reasons for the changes.

However, a few of these interactions are worth highlighting because they illustrate both the complexity of the issue and the prevailing cultural gap between management and staff.

- In one of the regional offices, a staff member asked me anxiously how I or anyone could take away the pension she had expected, having made her contributions. Once I explained that under the existing scheme staff members contributed 6% and the RCN contribution was 12% = 18% but recipients were expecting to receive 50% or more of salary, index-linked for life, with dire financial consequences for the College. Once explained, this member of staff readily accepted my explanation, but she made the point that she had never understood the financing of the pension scheme, as was the case with many other members of staff. I was also able to provide reassurance that all existing contributions were protected and for many people, especially those near retirement, moving to a career average or defined contribution scheme would make very little difference to their pension.
- In another office there was very low attendance from the staff, and I was informed that the local trade union officer of the union that most staff were members of, were instructed not to attend and that all discussion should take place via the unions. In fact, I was meeting with both local union reps and their national officers, and we overcame that challenge.
- At Cardiff Gate, where I met with a large number of staff, I had a pre-meeting with the local senior manager, who impressed me with his commitment and enthusiasm. So, I was somewhat taken aback when we walked into the meeting together to find that it was being recorded without gaining my consent. In fact, I had no objection to being filmed, especially as it meant that those who were unable to attend would be able to watch the recording. But I wondered why the manager, who had seemed so helpful, had not mentioned or sought my consent to the filming before the session. It suggested a lack of trust as well as a poor sense of corporate responsibility and a suggestion that somehow the RCN, as a Royal College, was immune from financial realities.

After the road shows ended, I continued to work through the issues with the unions, the Council, the Executive and senior managers, helping people to come to terms with the necessity for change.

One of the unions responded unhelpfully by telling me they were considering embarrassing me by taking industrial action. My response was that I would be much more embarrassed to preside over an organisation that would be forced into bankruptcy and closure because of a failure to take the necessary action.

Much to the surprise of some union officials, the staff eventually voted overwhelmingly to accept my proposals. The final salary pension scheme closed in May 2007, just five months after I joined the RCN, and was replaced by a new, lower-risk career average scheme.

We did a deal with the Pensions Regulator that allowed for a payback over 10 years to reduce the deficit. However, the pension scheme will continue to be a challenge to the College for many years to come, and if action had been taken many years earlier this could have been avoided.

Just for the record, I ensured, staff knew the history behind the pension scheme and that when the scheme opened in 1922, the average recipient was expected to live just two years after retirement! As I told them all, pension schemes were like the 'Hotel California' in the famous Eagles song: you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!

Boosting the membership

In parallel with addressing the pension deficit the most pressing priority was to address the issue of membership. In January 2007 there were 390,000 members and the downward trajectory was accelerating, with the loss of around 20,000 per year, mainly due to retirement. When I left in 2015 there were 435,000 members and this trajectory has continued.

If we were to merely stand still in terms of subscription income, we would need to recruit this same number every year – and many more if we wanted to grow the income. While some of the regions had a proactive approach to recruitment, there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm in others.

I was surprised by this variation in approach; given that most of the College's income is derived from membership, recruitment should be at the top of everyone's mind. We also needed to give more thought to how to retain non-retiring members.

At our staff briefings we began explaining that we needed to raise our game where recruitment was concerned. And I pointed out that you didn't need to be a nurse to be an effective recruiter; what we needed were staff who could explain the benefits of membership to potential recruits – particularly in the fertile ground of university freshers' fairs.

I was delighted that huge numbers of staff from both HQ and elsewhere volunteered to be involved in this initiative.

I worked closely with our marketing and communications team and also worked on giving the receptionists at Cavendish Square a more proactive role in recruitment. When I joined, the standard process was that if a nurse came to reception and asked about how to join, they were referred on to Cardiff Gate. We equipped these conscientious, courteous and committed members of staff to sign people up on the spot.

At the same time, we provided more training in recruitment, improved the membership offer and made sure that only the most committed and enthusiastic volunteers were used to staff recruitment stands.

Getting on top of the finances

The task facing my new Director of Finance was immense. In 2007, the year before I joined, the auditors had threatened to qualify the accounts on a 'going concern' basis because the pension scheme deficit had created an overall organisational deficit. Famously, the response from one senior member of staff was to suggest we hire different auditors!

Eventually we arrived at a coherent position by means of a five-year strategy and, although our finances remained precarious, we at least had a clear understanding of the situation and how to establish stronger financial controls.

Core to this strategy was ensuring that every year the College set a surplus budget designed to grow reserves. At the time of our legal structure change in

2010 and the creation of the RCN Foundation, our reserves were negligible, with fixed assets just covering the pension scheme deficit.

By 2015 we had grown our reserves, including the pension scheme liability, to over £70 million. This included an investment portfolio that not only delivered year-on-year growth but more than £1m income per annum.

This astute financial stewardship, for which I am greatly indebted to Tim Golbourn and his team, has formed the foundation for the College's continued growth and prosperity. Tim will be the first to say that it was not only his team that achieved this which is true as all parts of the College began to appreciate the need for good financial management and the correct use of resources.

As a result, we were able to undertake a major refurbishment of Cavendish Square, bringing it into the 21st century as a learning hub using up to date technology. This included transformation of the library, providing a café open to the public and marketing the HQ for rent to other organisations, which by the time I left was beginning to generate income.

We developed a leadership and management development programme for all our managers across the RCN, this was to ensure they developed skills of managing an organisation effectively.

That wasn't all, there were several more detailed financial issues...

Lease cars

When I joined the RCN, 100 staff had lease arrangements that entitled them to a new car every three years, taxed and insured by the College and with full breakdown coverage and unlimited mileage.

When we investigated this arrangement more closely, we found that significant numbers of staff who had been on this scheme for years – in some cases more than 20 years – rarely, if ever, needed a car for their job.

Although many of these people were highly committed to the College and doing good work, the scheme was a flagrant example of mismanagement and it was shocking that the beneficiaries found it acceptable, given that the bill was ultimately footed by thousands of poorly paid nurses, who deserved better from those employed to represent their interests.

Reviewing the scheme was a challenge because it was embedded in contractual terms and conditions. But, after negotiating with the unions, we eventually brought the scheme to an end by buying out contracts at £11,000 per person. Some readers might find this an outrageously generous payout, but as a trade union leader I was not prepared to ride roughshod over people's contractual rights, however undeserved.

The bottom line is that closing the lease car scheme saved the College £300,000 a year – a recurrent saving that persists to this day.

Expenses and allowances

As CEO/General Secretary I had to travel extensively within the UK and sometimes internationally. Noting that some people were extravagant with their travel expenses, I set an example by making it clear that I would travel everywhere in the UK on standard fares and fly economy when going abroad.

When attending meetings of the International Council of Nursing in Geneva, I was able to fly out and back in a day thus avoiding overnight accommodation.

As a result, the underspend on the CEO budget for hotel and travel expenses amounted to more than £20,000 in my first year alone.

Hotels like Premier Inns and Travelodge's became the norm for overnight accommodation when necessary and staff were reimbursed expenditure via claim forms however, I ceased all expenditure on alcohol at the RCN Congress and other events.

Another example of unnecessary waste was the 'senior staff forum', a gathering of all the senior staff held every three months to discuss common issues, new ideas and generally seek better ways of working.

Who could possibly disagree with that? Except for the fact that it was held offsite in a 'neutral' venue to create a more 'convivial atmosphere' when there was plenty of space available at the Cavendish Square HQ. This stopped after I pointed out that I expected better of senior people and that the expense of hiring external venues was being met by nurses who would be appalled at such a waste of their subscriptions.

Downsizing CEO office staff

I was fortunate to have inherited a highly competent and committed PA, and the PA to the Chair of Council and the President was equally efficient. However, three other staff in the office were surplus to requirements. Two of these decided to leave and the third was redeployed more gainfully, realising recurrent savings of more than £100k per annum.

With the savings on my expenses account referred to earlier and the downsizing of my office staff, I managed to recoup my salary of £120,000 in my first year.

Value added tax

VAT is a complex area for organisations like the RCN, where some activities are partially exempt, but when we examined our VAT returns, we found that we had been overpaying for many years to a total of £1 million. We were able to reclaim this overpayment, while regularising our VAT arrangements for the future.

Branch finances and regional offices

This was another area of concern for the auditors because the English branches operated independent bank accounts, although corporate accountability for the funds they held and spent rested with the organisation as a whole. The same was true of the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland boards, but it was more straightforward to bring them within the remit of the corporate finance team.

When I joined, less than 50 per cent of branches were submitting proper annual returns, with poor oversight and control by regions and countries, making it impossible to properly account for their spending.

On further investigation we found that many accounts were dormant or inaccessible because mandates were not being updated when branch officers changed.

It took well over a year to close around 300 local bank accounts and establish branch budgets under the RCN's control, enabling a much more structured approach to branch funding.

There were far too many regional offices when I arrived, although the Director for England Tom Sandford had already carried out a review which led to huge savings. In my time we closed the offices in Aberdeen and Banbury Cross, while the London office was relocated to Cavendish Square.

Refurbishment loan buyout.

In 2000 the College HQ in Cavendish Square had undergone a huge and extremely impressive refurbishment, financed by a fixed-interest bank loan. The terms of the loan needed to be revisited, particularly in the lead-up to the banking collapse of 2008, when we were contractually locked into an interest rate that was no longer justifiable.

The Director of Finance and I prepared a proposal for the RCN Council to sell £8 million worth of shares to buy out the loan and pay the early redemption fee. This made sense as we were paying more in interest than we were earning on our investments. The Council supported our proposal, and the deal was done.

A few weeks later the stock market collapsed, and the price of shares plunged. By taking action when we did, we had not only saved the College millions of pounds over the years to come but also realised the shared benefit. Had we delayed for just a few more weeks the losses to the College would have been too great and the liability for loan repayments would have continued for many years to come.

£1m reclaim

One of the trickier tasks facing the finance team was disentangling a complicated contractual arrangement with a supplier. In material terms there was a debt to the College of £1 million and it was never clear how this would be repaid. The Director of Finance and I met with the CEO and FD of the

company concerned and managed to negotiate reimbursement of the £1 million owed to us.

Transforming the culture

It should be clear by now that major cultural change was needed to set the College on a firm footing for the future. Staff engagement was key to achieving this goal, so together with the executive team, we started by speaking directly to the staff. We introduced a staff survey, to ensure we were hearing from the staff what it was like working at the RCN.

Although there were staff briefings before I arrived these only involved the Executive and senior management. I decided we needed a more inclusive approach so I introduced monthly briefings in the conference hall at Cavendish Square, which HQ staff could attend in person and others could watch simultaneously online. Staff were invited to ask questions or send them in by email during the briefing and I – or others in the Executive team, as appropriate - would attempt to answer them on the spot.

Staff appreciated the opportunity to understand what was happening and why, and these briefing sessions were a critical aspect of the gradual cultural change which took place during my tenure.

But more fundamental work was needed to rebuild trust across the organisation.

Rebuilding trust

There is no doubt that the RCN is a great place to work, with good pay, excellent terms and conditions and annual leave and sick pay allowances on a par with the best in the country. Despite this I was aware of underlying tensions not just between staff and senior management but between staff members.

I heard the word 'grievance' more times at the beginning of my tenure at the RCN than in the whole of my previous career. It seemed that every time there was a disagreement, lodging a grievance was the remedy of choice. In my monthly briefings I shared my view that once a grievance is lodged, relationships will often have broken down irreparably regardless of the outcome; and I encouraged people to speak to each other, seek mediation and look to more productive ways of resolving conflict.

My first task was to overhaul the human resources department. I created the post of HR Director and appointed a hugely talented individual David Cooper to the role in September 2007.

We set ourselves a number of aims, the most ambitious of which was making the *Sunday Times* list of the top 100 companies to work for.

The starting point was a staff survey which produced predictably dismal results. The vast majority of staff responded and most had a negative view of their managers, particularly the more senior ones.

I shared the results at the staff briefing and we devised action plans to address the concerns that had emerged from the survey. Developing our managers,

changing the grievance culture, improving staff engagement and communication to name a few.

Eighteen months later we re-ran the survey, and the results were truly spectacular, with massive improvements in nearly every field.

Significantly more people expressed:

- satisfaction with the RCN overall.
- confidence in the executive team and senior managers.
- satisfaction with the recognition they received for doing a good job.
- satisfaction with their total benefits package.
- pride in working for the RCN and a sense of belonging.

The upward trajectory continued, and in 2011 we entered the *Sunday Times* list in 51st place – an achievement that would have been unimaginable just a few years earlier.

Staff morale was high, grievances virtually a thing of the past, turnover and sickness levels at record lows. There were still difficulties at times, but this was a transformation everyone involved in the realignment of the RCN could be proud of.

Collective leadership

When I joined, the RCN lacked a strong corporate approach to leadership, with Executive decisions often interpreted differently by individual teams, resulting in confusion.

My solution was to set up a senior leadership forum, with all senior leaders making shared decisions about moving forward and then held accountable for communicating these decisions to their teams. This approach played a critical part in moving us away from a blame culture directed at senior management.

In order to support our leaders and managers and give them opportunities for development, we introduced a coaching programme, 360° feedback, leadership development opportunities and an annual staff survey.

Increased visibility

At the same time as bolstering internal communications, I was keen for the Executive to get out and meet members in their workplaces. In most cases I was pushing at an open door and some of the existing Directors, notably Tom Sandford, Director for England, were already doing this.

As for me, I enjoyed travelling all over the UK, visiting places I would otherwise may never have seen – Hartlepool, Bridgend, Aberdeen, Orkney, the Western Isles and many more.

Each week with very few exceptions I visited members working in clinical settings. This was one of the most enriching aspects of my job. Hearing and

seeing at first hand their clinical work constantly brought into sharp relief the immense contribution nurses make to healthcare.

I also developed a strong relationship with the medical services of the armed forces, as a result visiting the Centre for Defence Medicine in Birmingham on several occasions and the wards at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham, where injured personnel from Iraq and Afghanistan were treated. This also led to me visiting Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of the conflicts there.

Governance

The lack of good governance at the RCN was apparent to me right from the start of my tenure, which is why I quickly raised the status and profile of the discipline by appointing a Director of Governance.

I think this problem at the heart of the RCN is exemplified by the following story, which I have decided to include after careful thought.

A member of my executive team told me about a significant financial discrepancy of £50,000 in relation to grant income transactions in one part of the College. I was further informed, to my astonishment, that the member of staff involved refused to discuss the matter.

After satisfying myself that the concerns over the financial irregularity were well founded and that we had an audit trail, I decided to call in the police. This was not an action I took lightly, but a huge sum of money granted to the College was unaccounted for.

The police investigated the matter and interviewed the member of staff concerned, after which we quickly received a cheque for £25,000 – half of the sum in question. The police told us there was little chance of recovering further sums, as our accounting and audit processes at that time were not robust enough to lead to a conviction. However, the staff member left with immediate effect.

I brought this to the attention of the RCN Council because it was vital that they understood the need for good governance processes to protect the organisation.

The College has been well served by Jane Clarke as Director of Governance, and her support has been a key component in stabilising the College, with consequent benefits to its members.

The RCN Foundation

It was Jane Clarke who, to her credit, pointed out that the RCN was not structured and operating in compliance with charity law. The charitable component of the organisation had become intertwined with the main body and its trade union function, and a formal separation was required.

This involved a huge amount of work, since the Charity Commission wanted copies of the accounts stretching back 30 years. Thanks to painstaking work by the finance department under Jane's guidance, we were able to produce the necessary documentation and our action plan to separate the charity from the RCN and apportion the finances accordingly was approved by the Commission.

The separation needed to be formally approved at an AGM, and while most members readily understood the need for change, a small minority seemed either unable to understand the situation or to imply that we were doing something untoward. Bizarrely, one member accused us of money laundering when in fact we were doing the opposite and putting our house in order.

In the end the AGM voted overwhelmingly to accept the proposals, and the RCN Foundation was born. For the first 10 years it was chaired by Robert Sowney a former Council member, who did an excellent job.

The RCN entered negotiations with the Charity Commission in a weak financial position and we set ourselves the challenge of making both the RCN and the Foundation financially independent and viable within five years. Aided by the closure of a number of subsidiary companies and the merger of their work back into the College, we achieved our goal in just two years.

The publishing company

Royal College of Nursing Publishing (RCNP) produced a wide range of publications in addition to the flagship *Nursing Standard*.

But it needed modernisation, and here Jane Clarke led the way in getting it to engage more proactively with the digital era. The company was renamed RCNi in 2015 and a new Board of Directors with publishing expertise was established. I also reinforced that the publishing company should have editorial independence.

International affairs

In the process of getting on top of the RCN's finances I noticed that in 2006 the College paid annually £440,000 to the International College of Nurses (ICN), a Geneva-based federation of more than 130 national nurse associations representing more than 27 million nurses worldwide.

At first, I assumed this was a typographical error, but I soon found out it was true. Subscriptions are calculated according to the number of members in each country, and this was the annual liability for the College, which had been rising year on year – amounting to millions in total the RCN had paid into ICN over many decades.

From a distance I had been a supporter of the ICN, as a body with a global interest in the development of nurses and nursing. I had spoken at one of their conferences in 1999 and had been impressed by the people I had met from the ICN at other occasions.

I found that, despite the large number of member countries, there were three main financial contributors: the Japanese Nursing Association, The Spanish Nurses Association and the RCN. Under the ICN's constitution, only one nursing representative body from each nation was allowed to be a member. So many countries with far more nurses than the UK paid much lower subscriptions.

The USA, for example, has 3.5 million nurses, yet their annual subscription was only £35,000, since the nursing body in membership had a very small membership. France also has far more nurses than the UK, yet their nursing body that is a member of ICN also has a very small membership and their annual subscription was just £5,000.

I was also keen to ascertain, without implying any impropriety, where and how our money was being spent. But when I went to Geneva and put this question to senior people they reacted with incredulity and told me that the expenditure was none of my business.

This was the start of a tortuous business that took more than five years to resolve, with many meetings with ICN leading to no discernible progress. Our position was that there needed to be some serious levelling up from other wealthy nations with as many or more nurses than the UK, alongside concessions to assist those in greater need in poor and developing countries.

I also struggled with the poor management of ICN events. For example, in 2011 the main conference was held in Malta, which seemed a good idea on the face of it but made it inaccessible for many nations because of the scarcity of direct flights. In addition, Malta had experienced huge challenges because of the influx of refugees, and they were cautious about issuing visas and, for example, not a single Zimbabwean was permitted a visa.

On top of that, the conference was poorly organised, with the whole of the first morning wasted on a repetitious roll call, while attendance was thinly spread across too many sessions.

In response to all these issues, our membership of ICN was discussed at the 2013 AGM and the membership voted to leave.

In 2021, the membership voted to reapply for membership. I find it incredible the RCN has gone back to paying a huge annual subscription to an organisation that doesn't publish accounts and gives no clue as to how it spends the hard-earned money of its members.

I fear also that this will signal a return to the waste and extravagance that was prominent when I joined the College. When I first attended Council as an observer before I took up my post, it was agreed that 12 Council members would attend the ICN conference in Japan the following year.

However, at my first Council meeting as CEO, the numbers proposing to attend had jumped to 26. Given my awareness of the huge financial challenges facing the College, I took a stand against this unwarranted increase, and it was agreed to go back to the original delegation of 12.

In addition, there was a significant delegation of staff. One thing I was at a loss to understand was why several months earlier two staff members of staff had been sent to Yokohama – one of the most modern cities in the world – to check out the hotels and other logistics.

If the College goes back to those days of profligacy it will be heart-breaking that the people ultimately footing the bill will be the members of the RCN, who are among the hardest working yet poorly people groups in the UK.

Bearing in mind the College was on the verge of bankruptcy and I had to institute a pay freeze for our own staff it seemed illogical to pay such a huge sum of money to an organisation which in turn refused to inform us how this money was sent. A longtime supporter of the ICN spoke about the reputational damage for the RCN by leaving ICN. I in turn replied that the reputational damage to the RCN if it went bankrupt, which it was in danger of doing, would be far greater. To this day I want ICN to succeed however I am of the view they should publish annual accounts and there should be transparency over its expenditure.

Pay and politics

The 2008 pay negotiation round is worth highlighting because of a departure from standard practice. Normally the officials of the Secretary of State for Health negotiate pay increases with all the unions representing health service staff. But on this occasion the then Secretary of State for Health Alan Johnson asked to meet me and the General Secretary of UNISON Dave Prentice to see if we could reach an agreement in principle before widening negotiations out to the other unions.

Alan was fully aware of the significance of what he was doing and, as a former union leader himself, was aware of the need to avoid preferential treatment and get all the unions on side.

The outcome of the meeting was an offer of an eight per cent rise, with no strings attached, to take us through the next three years, which was viewed as a good deal by Dave and myself and subsequently accepted by the other unions.

Never would I have anticipated that the eight per cent deal we struck in 2008 would be the last of any significance over the last 17 years.

Pay freeze 2010-2015

After the economic crash of 2008 and the General Election of 2010, the consensus was that the public sector would have to shoulder some of the burden of economic recovery, and the RCN and other unions reluctantly accepted a pay freeze.

In the light of this sacrifice, I felt very strongly that I, as Gen Sec/CEO should not accept the annual cost of living award that the RCN would agree for its staff after consideration by the Remuneration Committee. My annual salary was many times that of the average nurse, which at that time was around £25,000. And it seemed iniquitous to me that nurse members should fund a pay award for staff while they themselves were subject to such tough austerity measures.

Each year for five years until I left the RCN I declined an annual uplift. And although at the time I was clear I didn't want any publicity for taking this stance, I think it is now reasonable for me to mention it as a matter of record. Attached as appendices 1 and 2 are two letters from the Chair of the remuneration committee Anne Wells confirming this.

Reconnecting with politicians.

When I joined the College in 2007, I worked with the parliamentary team to resurrect some political relationships that had gone by the board.

As a result of these efforts the RCN Congress of 2009 was attended by the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown as well as David Cameron, leader of the

opposition, and Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats, who emerged as a key player in the 2010 General Election, leading his party to win 57 seats and so form a coalition with the Conservatives.

At other times Congress was also addressed by Anne Milton MP, a nurse and former RCN steward, Andrew Lansley MP, Alan Johnson Secretary of State for Health, Ed Miliband when he was leader of the Labour Party, and Anne Keen, nurse and health minister. In addition, I gave evidence on several occasions to the Health Select Committee and spoke in debates at Westminster.

Our parliamentary team regularly contributed to legislation by the Westminster Government and the devolved assemblies.

Most notable was our opposition to the Health and Social Care Act 2012, colloquially known as 'the Lansley reforms', after Secretary of State Andrew Lansley, who conceived the legislation, which has since been widely discredited.

The RCN and the Royal College of General Practitioners were most vocal in our opposition to the Act, although I don't think we always received credit for our stance from the membership.

Building our media and public profile

A key target of our external communications was to raise our profile in the media. The health service is rarely out of the headlines and there was a time when the RCN had played a prominent role in media coverage, but this had diminished over the years.

With the head of communications on the Board, we were able to embark on a proactive campaign of media engagement, which paid off rapidly. Within a few months we had established ourselves as one of the 'go to' organisation for media, not just in relation to nursing matters but broader health issues.

We were featured regularly on BBC news, Sky, Channel 4, and ITV, and I personally gave dozens of interviews on the BBC radio 4 *Today* programme, the Nick Ferrari show on the LBC radio station and many others such as the Andrew Marr show the predecessor show to the Laura Kuenssberg show. I was also interviewed – twice – for the hard-hitting BBC World programme *HARDtalk*. But I didn't want our media profile to simply focus on me and staff across the board were regularly seen on TV and quoted in other media outlets, while the country and regional officers also increased their media activity.

We also received massive publicity for our prominent opposition to the 'Lansley reforms' mentioned above and when we changed our stance on assisted dying.

Assisted dying.

In 2009 there was a significant media public interest in assisted dying, with publicity around people with terminal illnesses going to Dignitas in Switzerland to end their lives. I suggested to the RCN Council that we should reappraise our longstanding opposition to having assisted dying enshrined in law.

Our subsequent move to a neutral stance made us the lead story in the media for several days, reflecting the importance of nurses in such discussions.

On a personal note, I was delighted to be invited to meet Lord Joel Joffe, who had previously attempted to get a bill on assisted dying through parliament without success. I knew of Lord Joffe's work as a young solicitor in South Africa, who had represented Nelson Mandela at his trial in 1963, when he was sentenced to life imprisonment for his opposition to apartheid.

As a young white man, Joel Joffe was viewed as a pariah by the white minority South African Government and had to leave South Africa for his personal safety. He managed to smuggle his papers from the trial out of the country and many years later these resulted in a book, *The State vs Nelson Mandela*. A few days after our meeting, Joel sent me a signed copy of the book, which I will always treasure.

At the time of writing in 2025, a bill on assisted dying, correctly known as the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) bill is being debated in Parliament.

The Margaret Hayward case.

One of the hazards of being employed by a membership organisation is that there is never a time when someone is not complaining that the organisation does nothing for them. Although there are always cases where we could have done better, what goes below the radar are the countless examples of where we have saved careers and livelihoods.

One case in point is that of Margaret Hayward, a nurse who in 2009 raised serious concerns about standards of care in her hospital, undertaking covert filming of abused and neglected patients for the BBC's *Panorama* programme. As a result, she was dismissed from her job and struck off the nursing register by the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The RCN represented her and took the NMC to court – a case that attracted huge publicity because it was a classic example of shooting the messenger. As a result of our representation, Margaret was reinstated to the Register.

Nurses' voices from the troubles.

While I enjoyed all my visits to nurses across the UK, I hold Northern Ireland particularly in great affection, finding its people exceptionally friendly and hospitable.

Janice Smyth the then RCN's Northern Ireland Director and I were approached by the very talented Margaret Graham and the late Jean Orr of the College's history of nursing group in Northern Ireland, who wanted to produce a book giving verbatim accounts of nursing through the 'troubles', from 1968 to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

We were delighted to support this initiative, and the book "*Nurses' Voices from the Northern Ireland Troubles*" was published in September 2013 and launched in the Guildhall Londonderry/Derry the following month.

I make specific reference to this because it is a seminal work on the contribution of nurses during the 30-plus years of the troubles and will be a source of inspiration to many for years to come.

It was also a pleasure to meet with The Most Rev Edward Daley, former Bishop of Derry an iconic figure in Northern Ireland when, as a curate, he was filmed waving a white handkerchief on the afternoon of Bloody Sunday, when 13 people were shot dead by paratroopers. A man of peace he did so much in his lifetime to forge reconciliation between the two communities

Awards and acknowledgements

Media.

Our media efforts were rewarded in 2012 when the communications team won a prestigious award from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the face of stiff competition. I was constantly impressed by the high quality of our comms staff at HQ many of whom have gone on to enjoy highly successful careers. The same is true of the comms teams in the Regional and Country offices who brought to attention of the media, our members and the public a constant flow of information that was relevant locally as well as nationally.

Human resources.

Our HR Director David Cooper did some amazing work during my time, including a major overhaul of our management policies and practices, which had left much to be desired. Among many initiatives were annual staff awards and conferences attended by inspirational speakers including Karen Brady, Ruby Wax, Jonathan Davies and many others.

I was delighted when David won the HR Director of the Year award at the prestigious *Personnel Today* HR awards in 2012.

Gold awards.

There were many awards for the work of the College but of note is the Gold Award for our support for the military and the prestigious *Investors in People* award.

RCN Institute.

The Institute, was brim-full of talented people enhancing nursing practice from different disciplines. The research team were internationally recognised while our *Clinical Leadership Programme* was award-winning and adopted across the UK and as far afield as Australia. I would like the College to re-instate the *Clinical Leadership Programme*. I come across countless people who to this day say the programme was a seminal point in their career development.

Professional nurse advisers.

Within the nursing department there were several skilled and talented specialists I wish to recognise for their enormous contribution to the development of nursing practice both in the UK and internationally.

An example is in 2014, when I was invited to a meeting with the then Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies to discuss infection control. I felt it important that I was accompanied by our nurse advisor in infection control, Rose Gallagher whose knowledge of the subject was far superior to mine.

So impressed was the CMO with Rose that she was invited to join her working group on infection control and the CMO subsequently told me just how greatly her contribution was valued.

This was not the only advisor whose work was publicly acknowledged, and I received similar feedback from other agencies in relation to Fiona Smith advisor in children and young people's nursing, Helen Donovan public health lead, Lynn Young primary care, Amanda Cheesley professional lead for the management of long term conditions and end of life care Dawn Garrett professional lead, care of the elderly and dementia and Annie Norman criminal justice and learning disability advisor to mention but a few.

Other departments

There are many other departments, far too many to go into detail but worthy of mention.

The legal department, Policy and international, Employment relations, Conference, marketing and events, facilities and estate management all of whom make a huge contribution to the members of the College.

RCN Congress

The annual conference of the RCN is known as Congress.

I thoroughly enjoyed the nine congress's I attended between 2007 and 2015. I worked well the three Chairs of Congress, Jason Warriner, Rod Thomson and Stuart McKenzie. I found Congress to be an invigorating event and over the years countless members of the College saw it as the highlight of their nursing year. Many had attended Congress over the decades.

As with many other longstanding attenders at Congress I was shocked in 2021 when Congress was cancelled as a face-to-face event due to "serious allegations of sexual harassment".

It was also at that time that many issues were raised about the culture at the RCN and concerns over governance.

The RCN commissioned a review by Bruce Carr QC whose remit was to examine issues between 2018 and 2021. The report is a very depressing read, and I was saddened to read of the events from 2018 onwards where there are allegations of sexism and misogyny.

The Carr report is long and contains much detail and I would be happy to discuss my views on it at greater length if people would find it of interest.

For now, I wish to make some comments. I am not naïve to recognise that if you hold a residential event that several thousand people attend there are not some who behave in a way that they ought not to. However, the image that Congress was nothing other than a drunken orgy is simply not true and this has damaged the College and in turn the reputation and image of nursing.

I will give three examples to demonstrate my case.

In 2015 at my last Congress, Stuart McKenzie a long-time activist at the College who at that time was Chair of Congress, and who did an outstanding job as Chair was in a bar when he overheard two men commenting on a young woman who was a member of the College. Their comments were of a highly salacious nature and Stuart confronted them. These were not members of the College but were employed by one of the companies who were exhibitors at Congress.

Stuart made it clear in no uncertain terms that their behaviour was unacceptable. He also ensured the young woman was supported and that she was chaperoned back to her accommodation.

The next day we met with the company and informed them we did not wish to have these two people at Congress.

The second example is that in 2010 an RCN activist who enjoyed huge respect arrived at Congress in a psychologically distressed state. Several of her colleagues brought this to my attention. It was clear that to cope with her difficulties she was drinking heavily. We were so concerned that the then President, Maura Buchanan and I met with her. We talked through her difficulties, and it was self-evident that she needed help and support. We were also worried that if she became intoxicated and was out and about in the bars of Bournemouth, she could be vulnerable. With her agreement she left

Congress, and we arranged for her to have a taxi back to her home over a hundred miles away. We followed this up by giving her on-going support and to this day she is still in touch with me.

Finally, in 2014 a senior member of staff met with me and explained that a male member of Council was referring to members of her staff using terms such as “darling” and “sweetheart” and whilst he had not touched them, they were concerned that he regularly bent over them from behind when they were at their desks. Both women felt uncomfortable and unnerved by this. I immediately arranged to meet with the Council member who initially tried to downplay his behaviour, but I made it clear that it had to stop and if there was any recurrence I would be left with no alternative but to commence proceedings against him which could result in his removal from Council. His behaviour changed from that day on.

I offer these three examples to demonstrate that the management of Congress and the welfare of our members was always a serious consideration. Similarly, was the case with protecting staff members, as demonstrated by my addressing the behaviour of the Council member.

What happened from 2018 onwards is not something I am able to comment upon. No one is more saddened and shocked by some of the revelations than I am. I stand to be challenged but the issues in the Carr report were not prevalent during my time at the College.

I also wish to place on record that shortly after commencing at the College I stopped the provision of alcohol at all RCN events. My view was that whilst travel and subsistence was provided by the College this did not stretch to alcohol, once again reminding people both Council members and staff that RCN members do not pay their subscriptions to pay for people to consume alcohol.

In terms of misogyny, if the anecdotes in the Carr report are accurate, bearing in mind many people dispute them, then in my view it is reprehensible that these people were not confronted about their behaviour.

During my time at the RCN most Council members were women. Many of them were highly experienced and some were holding senior positions either in NHS management or in academia. People such as Eirlys Warrington, Stacey Hunter, Sandra James, Andrea Spyropoulos, Kath McCourt, Cecilia Anim and so many others. The notion that these women would tolerate a misogynistic and sexism culture is absurd.

...in conclusion

In 2015, after nearly nine years at the RCN, it was time to move on. I had achieved most of my objectives at the College and I needed new challenges. The past 10 years since I left have been good, and I continue to work across the UK and internationally.

My time at the RCN was enriching. I met and worked with countless people who impressed and inspired me.

I loved the camaraderie of the membership and their deep commitment to the interests of patients and their colleagues. I found the Chairs of Congress and its agenda committees great to work with.

The four Chairs of Council, Eirlys Warrington, Sandra James, Prof Kath McCourt and Michael Brown and the three Presidents, Maura Buchanan, Andrea Spyropoulos and Cecilia Anim were really good colleagues who gave me great support. Naturally there were tensions at times but on all major issues I was supported by the Presidents and Chairs of Council that I worked with.

At the time of writing this account of my time at the RCN the death was announced of Tina Donnelly who for many years was the Director of the College in Wales. Tina was a great supporter of mine, and I enjoyed working with her. Tina was at the forefront of developing the annual RCN nurse of the year awards in Wales. I was lobbied very hard by many people who did not wish to support this initiative. I was happy to support Tina and these awards, which have proven to be very popular, will be Tina's abiding legacy to the College in Wales.

Finally, I owe a great deal to our team of Executive and Regional Directors, whose immense talent and commitment played such a big part in turning round the fortunes of the College.

They would be the first to say that they could not have achieved so much without the support of their teams. And it is true that the RCN staff employs a huge amount of talent people whose commitment to nurses and nursing is second to none.

I would particularly like to single out my executive assistant Daniel Boyle and my PA Natalie Brindell-Clark who worked with me for their commitment and support.

Lessons learnt

1) It is vital that the strategic direction of an organisation is clear and that deep into the organisation there is clarity of purpose and an understanding of the ultimate objectives of the strategy.

2) The importance of teamwork, commencing with the Executive team across the spectrum to members of the College. It is essential that there is the collective ownership of the decisions and once a decision/policy has been agreed there is a collective responsibility to implement the changes.

3) Finance. Money is the oxygen that sustains an organisation. If an organisation is financially compromised, then irrespective of its ideals and objectives the organisation will fail. Collective ownership of the need to ensure every penny is spent wisely and that every budget holder has a clear understanding of their annual budget and receives timely, accurate information on income and expenditure.

4) The need to share doubts and reservations. As CEO it is not a weakness to share with your direct reports and others, as appropriate, any doubts and anxieties you have over issues. It is a big mistake to assume that you as CEO are the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge.

5) Value all the people who work in the organisation. Treat them as colleagues and not as members of staff. Have forums when everyone, irrespective of their role has the opportunity, to contribute their ideas, misgivings and reservations. The creation of a psychologically safe organisation did so much to give colleagues and members the confidence to speak up and contribute to the agenda.

Value the people because valued people make effective teams and deliver the organisational objectives and are authentic to the organisations values.

[Dr Peter Carter](#) OBE.

Appendix

APPENDIX I



**Royal College
of Nursing**
The voice of nursing in the UK

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Strictly Private & Confidential
To be opened by addressee only
Dr Peter Carter
RCN HQ

27 February 2014

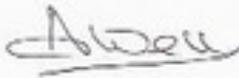
Dear Peter

Thank you for your letter of 15th January 2014 confirming that once again you will be not be accepting an annual pay rise.

It is my view and indeed that of the entire Remuneration committee that this represents exceptional leadership and personal judgement at a time when our membership faces an ever increasingly difficult time .

I am sure if they all knew the members would applaud your decision.

My best wishes.



Anne Wells
Chair of Remuneration Committee

Cc: David Cooper, Director of Human Resources, Estates and Organisational Development

Appendix II



Royal College
of Nursing

The voice of nursing in the UK

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16 February 2015

Dear Peter

Thank you so much for your letter of 29 January. I hope you know how much I personally and the other members of the Remuneration Committee admire and support the approach you have taken on this issue. It sets just the right tone and speaks volumes about your values and those of the organisation.

I also know I speak on behalf of all of Council and our members when I say that the whole organisation recognises and values your commitment to the RCN and your achievements since you have been with the college. I am also only too well aware of the very long hours you work on our behalf, how many weekends that involves and how often your holidays are interrupted. This letter comes with a very big thank you from us all.

Yours sincerely

Anne Wells
Chair of the Remuneration Committee