



Press Release

Immediate Release

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How I Became a Director of Nursing despite Leaving School with Just Two O-Levels

This week (Wednesday 21 February) is Mental Health Nurses Day, an opportunity to celebrate the unique contribution that nurses and support workers make to our profession.

A Registered Nurse for more than 20 years, David Wilmott has worked across a number of services including acute and mental health.

He is currently Director of Nursing at Cygnet Group, a leading independent health and social care organisation which provides services for young people and adults with mental health needs, acquired brain injuries, eating disorders, autism and learning disabilities within the UK.

David has shared his story of how leaving school with little qualification didn't hold him back in reaching his nursing ambitions.

I left school with two O Levels and I didn't really have a career in mind, but nursing was in the family and my mum told me I'd be good at it. So I thought, 'why not?'

I started as a Health Care Assistant at the Royal Gwent Hospital, in Newport, South Wales, in 1991 and I loved it, so I did three nights a week at night school to get my grades to train to be a student nurse.

I then spent 10 years in various clinical positions before moving into mental health commissioning and leadership. I joined Cygnet Health Care in 2018.

Having struggled academically at school, becoming a registered nurse was the proudest day of my life. It felt a real achievement.

After that, becoming a ward manager was the most amazing job in the world, because it gives you the unique ability to change the quality of care for patients. No doubt it's one of the most challenging roles, but also rewarding. It gives you the chance to recruit and develop nurses, influence standards and shape the quality of care. It was an immensely exciting time.

I moved into a leadership role because it provided a real opportunity to influence nursing care on a much larger scale. There's scope to guide the direction of nursing within an organisation but also through wider networks such as the MHN Directors Council which influence national programmes of work.

In my opinion, making the workforce fit for the future is the biggest challenge facing the nursing profession. There are challenges around attracting people in to Mental Health nursing in particular. There's no denying it is a tough job and incentivising people is key. When I went to university, I didn't have to pay tuition fees, I had a bursary, but now nurses leave with huge debt. We are seeing spaces left unfilled in university courses and this needs to be addressed.

The pandemic elevated the status of nursing and the clinical expertise our workforce brings. It showed the highly skilled and numerous talents that we have across the profession. Nurses and care workers come from a host of backgrounds that truly represent the diversity of our society. Without a doubt, this is a career that has an impact on so many lives. I think the world realised how vital nurses are to us all.

I am proud that here at Cygnet there are lots of roles available in nursing and more career pathways opening up for support workers, carers and nurses. Wherever you are in your career there are opportunities so don't be afraid to ask questions about how colleagues, friends or relatives got to where they are.

Other people's successes can be an inspiration.