

Neurodiversity and Clinical Practice

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I am a senior Nurse working for National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom. I am also Neurodiverse. I am autistic. At least 20% of the population of the UK are Neurominorities - representing a significant proportion of existing staff, and NHS users.

The NHS is the biggest employer in United Kingdom and one of the largest employers globally. Sizing up the world's biggest employers and compiling a list of the top 10, the NHS is revealed to be the fifth largest, with 1.7 million workers across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland meaning that approximately 400,000 staff could be Neurominorities.

That number is an estimate because currently neither the NHS, nor the Nursing and Midwifery Council (regulator for nursing and midwifery professions in the UK) nor the Royal College of Nursing (world's largest nursing union and professional body) hold any data.

The NHS knows every little detail about its employees: their age, colour of skin, sexuality, gender orientation and religion. Did you know that currently, on the NHS annually staff survey, you have 18 different options to classify the colour of your skin... but when it comes to invisible disabilities there are no boxes to tick!

Nobody knows.

Being autistic in nursing has its challenges. Since my disclosure a few years ago, I have encountered plenty of unconscious bias. It is not made easier when your colleagues (across all bands) refuse to believe your diagnosis or make comments such as "you don't look autistic" or "you must be high functioning". Requesting reasonable adjustments often feels like Oliver Twist asking for MORE.

As in the United Kingdom we mark 13 years of the Equality Act, these protected characteristics have moved from 'progressive corporate initiatives' to business-critical topics. We are losing clinicians left, right and centre. Retention has become the biggest headache for any NHS Trust up and down the country.

But this shortage of Nurses is not unique in the United Kingdom. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that currently there is a global shortage of health workers, in particular nurses and midwives, who represent more than 50% of the current shortage in health workers.

Achieving health for all will depend on there being enough well-trained and educated, regulated, and well supported nurses and midwives, who receive pay and recognition commensurate with the services and quality of care that they provide.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, the global shortage of nurses was estimated at 5.9 million nurses. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) projects that over 13 million nurses worldwide are required to bridge the gap in the nursing shortage by 2030.

In Great Britain Recent estimates made by The RCN reveal a supply-demand **gap of 140000 nurses in the NHS in England by 2030.**

We have come a long way in improving Equality and Diversity in NHS but what it comes to invisible disabilities we are still stuck in the 1980s.

Talking amongst my Neurominority colleagues most of them are afraid of disclosure because they believe it will impact negatively because of the negative stigma associated with Neurodiversity. NHS have invested millions in trying to remove unconscious bias. To fight them you need knowledge and education but how can we fight unconscious bias, regarding invisible disabilities, if we don't have any knowledge or data on how many people working in the NHS are affected?

I am Nurse and my background is quality improvement. Evidence based practice is the key to improve healthcare quality and patient's outcome.

Data is the new currency. Eighty-one Nurses a week are leaving the NHS due work-related stress. How many of them are Neurominorities?

Nobody knows.

Without data it's nearly impossible to know if any initiative to improve Neurodiversity support and acceptance have any positive impact. If we want to change the culture surrounding invisible disabilities, we need to start asking the questions. Is not good enough asked the staff if they consider themselves disable. I want to see more options where I can identify myself. We need to break down the question as specific as your ethnicity group, religion or sexually orientated. As a Senior Nurse it would have been more valuable to know how many staff need support with their invisible disabilities that not who they go to bed

For that reason, I have started to successfully lobby the National Health Service, The NMC and The RCN for better data collection on neurominority staff.

I am seeking to address the current lack of information on Neurodiversity among the Nursing and healthcare staff so the staff can receive better support.

The current forms give staff only limited options to declare a disability which could just by asking whether they consider themselves to be disabled.

However, a lot of neurominority people don't consider ourselves disabled. By legal aspect we are. But if you ask this question, probably 99% of us will say no. And for me, it's quite important to have a question where we can see ourselves and tick the box."

I want the disability questions on forms to be expanded to give people more options, including specific boxes on Neurominority conditions.

Identifying staff with invisible disabilities may then lead to more reasonable adjustments being put in place by employers. It's important to know what kind of support the nurses need to try to prevent burnout and try to prevent the exodus now happening in the NHS,

Gaining a better picture of neurodiversity among NHS staff would also help to identify current good and bad practice in terms of employer support and where more training might be needed. I want to get to a National Health Service where all Neurominority staff are an “asset” rather than a “problem”.

My hope is that by identifying and helping all these people and creating a better culture and better understanding of neurodiversity, they won't need to spend all this energy pretending to fit in in a Neuromajority world. They can be themselves and they can spend their energy on their talents and on their skills that are much needed on a team. The response from the organisations has been positive and the work has already started.

I am determined to make Neurominorities more visible and change the negative perception and stigma often comes with Neurodiversity.

At the end of the day the more diverse the workforce the better. It can lead to better outcomes for everyone. Diversity drives creativity and innovation and believe me Neurominority people have creativity in abundance.

Change is coming.

Watch the space.