Make a difference as an RCN steward
We help to make a difference...  
...and now you can too

Congratulations! You are now a Royal College of Nursing steward. You can make a real difference to the working lives of nurses and also open up new opportunities for yourself.

You are part of a national network of active RCN members working in every part of the health service, in nursing education, in hospitals and the community in the NHS and the independent sector.

The RCN is the voice of nursing in the UK, and RCN stewards like you are offering essential support to more than 370,000 nurses and health care assistants who are members.

This booklet gives you a flavour of what it means to be an RCN steward. For more detail you have special access to an activist area of the RCN website: www.rcn.org.uk/activist – with its dedicated pages for stewards. Also you will shortly begin comprehensive training through your local RCN office in every aspect of being a steward.

When you begin working as an RCN steward you will know that behind you is expert help and advice from your regional officers and from the RCN nationally.

Welcome.
Having the RCN support me to support RCN members has been a very rewarding, and at times, challenging journey. Being a steward has enabled me to take a lead role in the Knowledge & Skills Framework for Agenda for Change. The experiences and opportunities it has given me are second to none.

Daniel Cummings, RCN steward

Being an RCN steward is very rewarding because you feel you can help your fellow nurses and make a difference. You also get training to help develop your role and this can be useful for your personal and professional development.

Valerie Bankole, RCN steward

I was accredited as an Agenda for Change rep in 2004 and I’m looking forward to the challenges ahead. After 30 years as a nurse and RCN member, it’s never too late to return some of the support I have been given over the years.

Sally Goadsby, RCN steward
Make a difference

Your role as a steward is vitally important to nurses and nursing. As an RCN representative you are the face of the RCN in the workplace, supporting members and encouraging other nurses to join so they too can appreciate the benefits.

With so much changing in every part of the health service you are needed more now than ever. Thank you for becoming an RCN steward.

What will I do as an RCN steward

This booklet will provide some of the answers and it also points you to where you can find out much more – particularly the activist area of the RCN website.

As an RCN steward you will cover a wide range of issues. These broadly fall into seven categories. You will be:

1. negotiating with employers
2. advising members on Agenda for Change
3. representing members needing support either individually or collectively
4. advising members on employment rights
5. helping recruit more nurses to the RCN and promoting the organisation
6. developing new personal skills such as negotiating and media relations
7. helping to communicate key RCN campaign messages.

As an RCN student steward you will support other nursing students by providing information on issues such as work placement problems, accommodation and harassment or bullying.

Beverly Malone RN PhD FAAN
General Secretary
All you ever wanted to know... about being an RCN steward

What will I actually be doing day to day?
No day is the same! Your main role is to support RCN members with any employment issue they may have and ensure they are treated fairly by their employers. You may be representing members individually at grievance or disciplinary hearings or groups of members who have a collective grievance against their employer. As a steward you also encourage nurses in your workplace to join the RCN and promote RCN campaigns and policies on issues such as pension reform, Agenda for Change and reducing the prevalence of MRSA.

What sort of training will I receive?
Now that you have been elected you will be invited to training events to help you carry out your steward’s duties. First, you will be invited to an ‘Introduction to the RCN’ course run by your local RCN office. Following this, and as you develop your role, you can take up training in skills such as recruitment, representation, and negotiation. Along with guidance from your RCN officer, this training ensures that you can give a good service to RCN members in your workplace.

What support can I call on day to day?
As an RCN steward you can call on comprehensive support either from your local RCN lead steward, your local branch, regional officers at your local RCN board, or from specialists at RCN headquarters. You will find that the RCN website, with its dedicated area for activists, can also answer many of the questions you may have. Further, round-the-clock support is available from RCN Direct with its expert advisers.

Contact your RCN regional officer if you need advice or a second opinion. Regional officers, who have often been RCN stewards themselves, have the experience and access to information to help with more complex cases.
Are all RCN stewards doing the same things?

No, stewards work in a whole variety of settings from hospitals and community in the NHS to the independent sector and in nursing education. Stewards in independent health care may have different relationships with employers than in the NHS depending on whether there is a recognition agreement with the RCN. Nursing student stewards focus on pre-employment issues such as placements and accommodation. RCN Agenda for Change stewards concentrate on supporting RCN members as pay modernisation is introduced.

What do I do if a nurse who is not an RCN member asks for my help as a steward?

Your responsibility as a steward is to RCN members. The RCN cannot represent anyone who was not in membership at the time of an incident, although you could offer advice informally.

Will it mean a lot of meetings?

By its very nature, being a steward involves meetings with members and with employers. The majority of these will be in working hours, allowed for by your employer.

How do I fit into the RCN as a whole?

As an RCN steward, you can sometimes feel like a small cog in a very big machine. You need to remember that without you, the RCN could not function. Your closest ties will be with your local RCN branch and your RCN board. There is also a national committee, the UK Stewards Committee which has a representative from each board. The representative represents the views of local stewards on national issues. There are also two national conferences each year and events at RCN Congress.

You are also part of the team of RCN representatives which, as well as stewards, includes safety representatives, learning representatives and activists in your local branch.
How do employers regard RCN stewards?

Relations with employers both in the public and private sectors are most often founded on mutual respect. In many workplaces, partnership arrangements are in place encouraging regular dialogue between employer and staff. Your duties as a steward are protected under employment legislation. Employers recognise that a constructive relationship with RCN and other union representatives is good employment relations practice.

Do I have the right to time off for RCN duties?

If your employer recognises the RCN for negotiating purposes, you must be granted reasonable amounts of time off with pay from your job for training and for your steward responsibilities.

Will I have an office to work from?

Your employer may have a facilities agreement under which union representatives are provided with certain resources such as an office and a telephone. You will also have access to specially designed RCN letterheads and business cards as well as templates for posters, leaflets and notice board headers.

Can I claim for expenses incurred as a steward?

Yes, any costs incurred during your work as an RCN steward, such as phone bills, photocopying and printing are reimbursed. Expenses forms are available from your RCN regional office.

Do I cover health and safety issues also?

The RCN has a national network of safety representatives, and there may well be one in your workplace. However, you still may be approached by RCN members as the first point of contact. You need to know what steps to take with safety enquiries, such as referring members to WING – an RCN membership group specialising in supporting members with mental or physical illness or work related ill-health.

What happens if I give the wrong advice? Can I be sued?

It is almost unheard of for an RCN steward to be sued. If you need support first turn to your local RCN officer. As an RCN steward you are protected by a professional indemnity policy which covers claims against an individual steward or the RCN.
How do I get more members?

Recruitment features strongly in your training, as by recruiting more members it will give the RCN more influence both with your employer and employers nationally. Potential new members will ask you why they should join and how they will benefit, so you need to have the reasons clear in your head! Make sure you speak at the new staff induction events too and have a plentiful supply of recruitment literature. Once you have new members you need to keep them, and vital to this is keeping regularly in touch with everyone.

Will I have to represent the RCN in the local media?

From time to time you could be contacted by the local media to give the RCN view on a local or national issue. This can be both exciting and fun, and is invaluable in promoting the work and policies of the RCN. You can always check with your regional office or national press office if you are unsure. Your local RCN regional or national office may run training courses in media relations.
What will RCN members ask me about?

As an RCN steward you will never quite be sure what you will be asked next. But don’t worry, although you will pick up a lot of expertise, you are not expected to have all the answers. What matters is that you know how to get more help when you need it.

Your RCN officers are always on hand, and there is a wealth of information in the activist area of the RCN website.

These are some of the issues you will get involved with and be asked about by members.

Can you help me put my case?

Statements

An issue you may well be asked to help with is when a member is asked for a formal statement following an incident. Your initial role will be to ensure that the member does not admit liability or submit any kind of written statement until cleared to do so by the RCN’s indemnity insurers. Subsequently, you can give advice to the member on what to include in the statement. They need to:

- present facts only and using a chronological sequence of events if appropriate
- refer to any relevant papers or documents
- avoid any hearsay or personal opinions
- refer to people by name and position
- avoid jargon and abbreviations
- state the name and position of the person writing the statement
- sign and date the statement.

Ensure a copy is kept in a safe place.
Contracts of employment
You will encounter questions about contracts regularly. It may be a member just about to take up a new job, a member worried about something in their existing contract or a member who is being told by their employer that their existing contract will no longer apply. Members may also need advice on resignations or constructive dismissal. In such cases and in many others around contract law you will need to involve your lead steward and your RCN office quickly before any action is taken.

In your stewards training you will cover contracts in a lot of detail.

Disciplinaries
A member may ask for support if their manager is investigating an incident which may lead to disciplinary action. You will need to find out what lies at the root of the problem and then represent the member at any hearings with managers and advise the member on what action to take.

Unfair dismissal
If you have a member threatened with dismissal you should immediately seek advice from your lead steward or RCN officer. There are complex rules relating to dismissal, which can end up in an employment tribunal.

Grievances
You may be asked by a member to represent them if they feel they have been unfairly treated at work. They may be concerned at the conduct of a manager or at a request to change their terms and conditions of work. As an RCN steward you will investigate to see if there are reasonable grounds for a grievance, and, if so, support the member through the formal grievance procedure.

Collective disputes
You may be approached by a group of members with the same problem. It is called a collective dispute if the RCN takes up the issue on behalf of all the members. It may be that managers are trying to introduce a change in working practices which will affect a number of nurses. In most cases there is a local procedure to be followed to resolve this, agreed between the RCN, other unions and the management.
Representation
You may be representing RCN members at the joint partnership meetings between staff and managers. Local partnership arrangements are set up so that staff and managers can reach agreement on matters of mutual interest which affect employees in the workplace. You will also be representing individuals and groups of members when disciplinaries or grievances arise. Look under ‘grievances’ and ‘disciplinaries’ in this list.

Redundancy
On rare occasions, members may face redundancy. The employer is obliged to consult with trade union representatives prior to any action. The RCN and other unions will be putting forward alternatives to redundancy and this will involve RCN officers.

Industrial action
Members and potential members may well want to know the RCN position on this. It will be covered in detail in your training, but essentially since 1995 the RCN has given members the choice of taking limited industrial action but only if it is not detrimental to patients or clients. There are clear procedures which must be followed before any action can be taken.
Am I getting what I am entitled to?

**Agenda for Change**
Members are certain to contact you with questions about how their pay and conditions may be affected by Agenda for Change. You may feel confident to answer these questions yourself or you may wish to refer the member to one of the RCN’s Agenda for Change stewards, who can advise members on such issues as job evaluation and local appeals.

**Independent sector nursing**
You may be asked by members what the RCN can do for them if they work in the independent sector. A quarter of RCN members are now employed outside the NHS. The RCN is recognised in many independent health care organisations and here, RCN stewards can be elected to represent members.

**Maternity rights**
Every pregnant employee has clear rights under maternity law. These relate to how much leave they are entitled to, how much they are paid, and what happens to their job whilst they are on maternity leave. Pregnant employees cannot be dismissed on grounds relating to their pregnancy.

**Welfare advice**
RCN members may sometimes face life crises where they need grants or loans to get back on their feet. They may well approach you for advice. The RCN has a Benevolent Fund which may be able to help with a grant or loan. More details on this are available on the RCN website.

**Membership offers**
You may be asked about the special services open to RCN members, such as the RCN credit card, discounts on shopping, car and travel insurance and good rates for loans. Personal accident insurance is also available, designed specifically for nurses in conjunction with WING, the RCN Work Injured Nurses Group. These are provided through the Liverpool Victoria group of companies – the RCN authorised supplier of membership benefits. Members can contact Liverpool Victoria by going to www.liverpoolvictoria.co.uk/rcn
What do I do next?

**Professional misconduct**
As a steward you need to be particularly aware of the seriousness of such a charge against a member. Any issue involving the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code of Conduct should be referred to your local RCN office immediately.

**Diversity**
Discrimination, whether in conditions of employment or through harassment, is wrong. It can have a devastating effect on individuals and the RCN takes it very seriously. That is why all RCN stewards receive special training in handling diversity issues, whether at work, or for students at their place of study. You may be representing internationally recruited nurses, who now form an increasing part of the NHS workforce. They may have particular issues around culture and language in the workplace, and the RCN includes this in training for stewards.

**Bullying and harassment**
Unfortunately, bullying and harassment, although not commonplace, do exist in health care. As a steward you will from time to time be supporting members suffering this. Such situations can be extremely sensitive and you may need to involve your RCN officer.

**Stress at work**
Nursing is potentially a very stressful occupation and you may well be contacted by members about the pressures they face. If there is not a RCN safety representative in your workplace, you should first contact your local RCN office.

**Transfer of employment**
Commonly known as TUPE, Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment). This is complex legislation which protects staff transferred to a new employer. RCN stewards need to work closely with their local RCN office to advise members on this.

**Case management**
The RCN has a system of recording and managing member cases to provide a consistent quality of service. It also allows the RCN to demonstrate the value of RCN support for members encountering work-related problems.
The big health issues

As an RCN steward you will be working within an ever-changing health service. Modernisation and reforms have a direct impact on RCN members and they will often turn to you for support and reassurance. The RCN ensures that stewards, and all RCN activists, have the very latest information on areas such as pay, pensions, MRSA, and reforms of the way the NHS and independent health care operate. The activist area on the RCN website www.rcn.org.uk/activist will provide you with all the latest information.

Current big health issues* which the RCN is responding to include:

Agenda for Change

No other issue, apart from NHS pension reform, so directly affects all members. The changes now underway to nurses’ pay and conditions are hugely complex. You will often be the first source of information and reassurance for members in your workplace. You may be handling Agenda for Change issues yourself or there may be an additional RCN steward focusing mainly on this. Your local RCN office will be a major source of support for you.

NHS Pension review

Of major concern to members, particularly those who have been in nursing for some time. The RCN is campaigning strongly for the fairest possible pension for nurses.

Foundation trusts

As more NHS trusts in England move to foundation status, members may be concerned at how their terms and conditions could alter. If you are an RCN steward in a foundation trust your role will be to reassure members that in most cases, the change in status of the trust will not directly affect them.

Recognition agreements in the independent sector

More than a quarter of the RCN’s membership work in the independent sector, in hospitals, care homes and clinics. The future development of the NHS is set to be closely tied to the independent sector. The RCN has been successful in winning recognition from many independent sector employers.

* Not all of these issues are UK-wide.
MRSA

Health care associated infection is a major issue across the health service. You may find that members need support when they face public and patient anxieties. Anxiety can easily develop into strong criticism, with nurses taking the brunt. In most workplaces there will be an RCN safety representative to deal with this, but you may well need to work with them.

Changes, changes

Members may be unsettled if not immediately affected by the amount of change currently underway in the NHS, much of it focused on improving patient choice in health services. One such initiative is Patient Choice, which gives patients a range of five hospitals, including one from the independent sector from which to have their care.

Another initiative is Payment by Results whereby a hospital has to reach certain activity levels before it receives payment. Treatment centres are a further development, often run by the independent sector and taking on work from NHS hospitals so as to ‘fast track’ certain operations and reduce waiting times. These changes can potentially reduce the income of hospitals which are seen as underperforming which will undoubtedly cause concern amongst staff.

Partnership is another issue that is being developed in different ways and for different reasons throughout the UK. It is important that as an RCN activist you are involved in any developments and changes within your workplace.

The implementation of the Wanless Report recommendations has also led to changes such as a more integrated service provision between health and social services.

Your RCN office will be able to advise you on any questions you get from your members, and there is also further information on the RCN website.
With you all the way...

The more you develop your skills as a steward, the more benefit there will be to RCN members and to yourself. The RCN can offer you a range of learning opportunities from residential courses to distance learning. The subjects covered can be anything from handling disciplinary cases to new employment legislation.

Training courses

As a steward you will be offered full training. After an introductory course at your local RCN office, your personal training needs will be assessed and you will be invited to relevant courses. These are often residential or a combination of residential and distance learning. There are also a variety of short courses on specific topics.

The RCN Learning Zone

Make the most of the Learning Zone, a flexible online resource which allows you to build up your own electronic professional development portfolio. It also has an area for activists with topics for stewards. The Learning Zone has great animations and graphics to encourage you to learn more. It recognises how learning has to fit around your busy life, and operates in bite-sized chunks known as learning opportunities.

Become a voice for the RCN and for nursing

You can play a vital part in voicing nursing concerns in your local media. With support from your local RCN office and the RCN’s communications team you can win valuable coverage in your local papers, radio and television. It will also give you additional skills.

Free Nursing Standard

Every steward, as an RCN representative, gets a free annual subscription to Nursing Standard magazine. All RCN representatives also receive a monthly copy of Newsline, updating you on activist issues in the RCN.
**The RCN website**

The RCN website, with its dedicated activist’s area is a powerhouse of information. In its discussion zone there is a special area solely for accredited stewards where they can share ideas and concerns.

**RCN representatives’ diary**

Every RCN representative receives a special diary with useful contact telephone numbers and email addresses, plus checklists of information on RCN services. This is in addition to the information in the RCN *Members’ Handbook*. 
RCN representatives. The bigger picture

As an RCN steward you are an essential part of a team of RCN representatives. Alongside you are RCN learning and safety representatives who also offer specialist support to RCN members.

Genalyn Carreon, RCN Learning Representative: As a nurse from the Philippines, I know how important it is for all nursing staff, in the NHS and the independent sector, to receive regular training and updating. My role as an RCN learning representative is both to promote the value of training and study days and to encourage employers and nurses alike to apply for the RCN courses on offer. If a nurse is not an RCN member I urge them to join so as not to miss out. I have found that being a learning representative has increased my confidence, my understanding of IT and the internet, and also my communication skills.

David Simpson, RCN Safety Representative: I want the workplace to be safe for RCN members. Almost everything in nursing has a health and safety aspect and nurses need guidance on the latest procedures and safety legislation. I help members with accident and incident forms, and advise on everything from health care associated infections to stress and latex allergies. Personally I have gained much greater insight into how the NHS and the independent sector operates. I have got so involved that I am now London regional representative on the UK Safety Representative Committee. I have also made a lot of friends and enjoy doing something which really benefits people.
Support when you need it

As an RCN steward you can be confident of expert advice and support whenever you need it. Each office now has a phone number with an 0845 prefix, which is a cheaper alternative for you to ring. If you are unable to use this service, you can still dial the existing number (in brackets).

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<th>RCN Wales HQ</th>
<th>0845 456 7875 (029 2075 1373)</th>
<th>RCN North East Midlands</th>
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<td>RCN Eastern</td>
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<td>RCN Scotland HQ</td>
<td>0845 456 7851 (0131 662 1010)</td>
<td>RCN London</td>
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<td>Aberdeen</td>
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<td>Lanarkshire &amp; Forth Valley</td>
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<td>0845 769 7064</td>
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<td>RCN WING (caring for ill, injured and disabled RCN members)</td>
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