

 **WORKFORCE**

Bid to launch new support network for neurodiverse nurses

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A senior nurse with Asperger's syndrome is seeking to set up a new national forum to support colleagues with similar conditions and to make the NHS a better place to work for neurodiverse staff.

Joan Pons Laplana, *pictured above*, has launched the project in partnership with the Royal College of Nursing and NHS Employers after discovering that the only support groups available in the health and care system were targeted at patients.

"The more diverse the workforce, the better we'll be"

Joan Pons Laplana

He is hoping to bring awareness to neurodiversity and encourage employers to implement reasonable adjustments to help other nurses with the challenges that come with it.

"Being neurodiverse, our brains are built differently. We react to projects and environments differently and sometimes we can look like the odd one," Mr Laplana told *Nursing Times*.

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways a human brain can work and interpret information. It covers conditions including dyslexia, autism and attention deficit disorder.

A digital senior charge nurse at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Mr Laplana, was not aware of his neurodiversity until recently but always felt different.

After becoming a father of a son who is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and a daughter who has Triple X syndrome, he went for tests himself.

It took Mr Laplana a while before he was comfortable to disclose his diagnosis at work due to the risk of being stigmatised.

However, Mr Laplana is now embracing his condition and wants to offer support to colleagues who have gone through the same thing.

"There are two core things all staff with autism need: an understanding line manager and a supportive environment. When I had these, I achieved so much more success in my roles," he noted.

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Recently, Mr Laplana was approached by Sally Massam, a nurse who found out she had autism during her training.

Ms Massam wanted to know what support was on offer for neurodiverse clinicians but to her surprise Ms Laplana found there was little available. The pair decided to work together to address this.

Figures suggest around one in 100 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum, meaning a significant number of nurses are likely to have a variation of the condition.

Mr Laplana and Ms Massam are currently liaising with Jim Blair, RCN project lead for learning disability nursing, to create a neurodiverse nurse forum and have set up a working group.

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Joan Pons Laplana

The vision of the group is to "create a workforce that includes, supports and welcomes those individuals with neurodiverse backgrounds".

As part of the project, the RCN is looking to produce a guide for managers and employers support nurses who are neurodiverse.

Mr Laplana said he hoped the work could help address the recruitment and retention issues in nursing by enabling neurodiverse individuals to progress in the profession.

He added that he wanted to get to a place where neurodiversity was spoken about positively, focusing on "abilities and not disabilities", and to change the stigma behind neurodiverse individuals in the workplace.

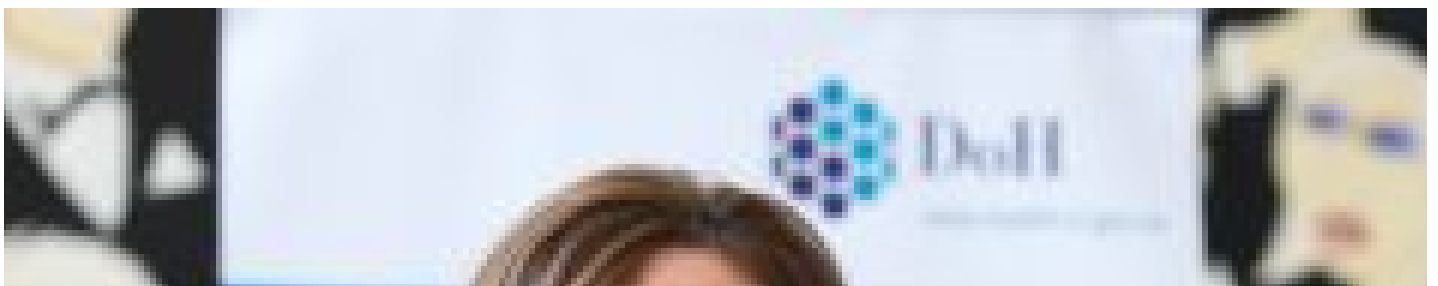
"The more diverse the workforce, the better we'll be," Mr Laplana said.

"I want to help, with the RCN, to create more awareness and unify a place for people who are struggling and to find a place that has resources and to be able to support each other and carry on being nurses.

"Basically, we are short on staff and everything, we cannot afford to lose any other nurse and that includes neurodiverse nurses."

More information about the project can be found [here](#) or by visiting the Twitter account [@NDNursesUK](#).

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