



Breaking down barriers

for nurses and midwives with a disability

For nurses and midwives with a disability, an already tough job is made all the more challenging when their skills are doubted at every turn. Registered Nurse and disability advocate Rachael Johnson says it's time to break down barriers and raise more awareness for people with a disability working in health care professions.

REGISTERED NURSE Rachael Johnson has a rare form of dwarfism and was diagnosed with renal failure at a young age.

She spent four years on dialysis before receiving a kidney transplant when she was seven years old.

Because of this experience, Rachael knew she wanted to become a nurse and repay the people who had made such a difference to her life.

However, things weren't plain sailing.

"I was belittled by nursing facilitators and repeatedly told that a nursing course was not suitable for me and I should 'go and find something you can do,'" Rachael said.

But Rachael's desire to become a nurse held strong. She worked tirelessly and qualified as a paediatric nurse in 2009.

Since then, she's worked in several areas of paediatrics both in the UK and in Australia, and currently works

at the Queensland Children's Hospital in neurosurgery.

Putting the focus on ability

Rachael's experience as a nursing student has made her all the more determined to break down the barriers facing people with a disability trying to enter the nursing and midwifery workforce.

"Many universities and facilitators have never been confronted with someone with a disability wanting to be a nurse, so they don't have processes or policies in place to support that," she said.

"Most people have no idea about simple things like how to communicate with someone with a disability, and I've been spoken to with language that was particularly shocking."

Rachael said it was vital that we change the stigma, where it's automatically assumed someone with a disability can't do something or will struggle to undertake tasks. ►

Photos: Rob Williams

Note: Masks were removed for photography purposes only and social distancing rules were followed throughout the photoshoot.



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Rachael Johnson,
Registered Nurse and
disability advocate

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"It's about getting the message across to focus on people's abilities rather than their disabilities," she said.

"As soon as people think of someone with a disability, they think they're going to have to do things for them or set things in place so they can do their job, but it's really not like that.

"There are many things we can do that people that don't have a disability can't – sometimes it even gives us a higher level of empathy and understanding for our patients because we have been through similar experiences.

"With a disability like mine, for example, where I have a short stature, I can relate to kids that can't mobilise well and draw from my own experiences and firsthand examples to share tips and put them at ease."

Paving the way

Rachael has also worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) to share her experiences and promote equal opportunities and access to employment in all sectors of health care.

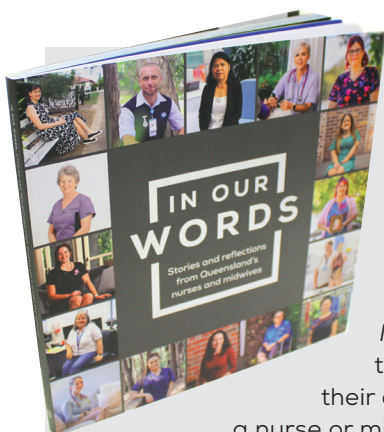
She's participated in talks and forums across the world and is one of the key faces of WHO's campaign to advocate for nurses with a disability.

She said putting herself in the spotlight wasn't easy, but it helped pave the way for better conversations and raise awareness on key issues.

"People began reaching out and I discovered what happened to me as a nursing student was not uncommon and others were going through a similar situation," Rachael said.

"While it made me sad to see that these negative attitudes still happen, I was heartened when lecturers from unis started emailing me and asking for my advice around better communication with their students, and I've participated in a few talks and lectures.

"It can be a fine line between setting things in place to support people with a disability and not singling them out and treating them differently, so I'm really glad I was able to help support other nursing students."



READ MORE OF YOUR NURSING AND MIDWIFERY STORIES

A snippet of Rachael's story was included as one of 50 stories written by QNMU members for our commemorative book, *In our words* – from reflections on their role, to anecdotes and standout moments in their career and what inspired them to become a nurse or midwife.



See page 65 to find out how you can win a limited edition hard copy or purchase your own copy at www.qnmu.org.au/InOurWords

Reaching for your goals

The QNMU previously shared Rachael's story on our social media channels, which led to an incredible outpouring of support for Rachael and her perseverance to achieve her nursing dream.

Rachael said she was overwhelmed by the hundreds of comments in response to her story, and it reinforced what she went into nursing to do... make a difference.

"It was amazing to read everyone's positive feedback and if I managed to touch even one person it makes everything worth it," she said.

"I've had people reach out to me with similar experiences and it's

exactly the reason why I put myself out there like this, so we can all support each other and keep raising awareness. Because while we've come a long way, there's still a lot to do."

Becoming a nurse was a passion Rachael grew up with, and her advice for others who are struggling to get into their career choice and experiencing discrimination due to a disability is to "prove them wrong".

"Keep going. As hard as it is, keep going and prove them wrong. I always tell myself there's nothing I can't do and no matter what people tell you, keep focusing on your goals and you'll get there.

"All the negative comments I received in the past made me all the more determined to become a nurse.

"The parent of a child awaiting a renal transplant once told me, 'You have given me so much hope'.

"This acknowledgement reinforces my belief that nursing is definitely the career for me."

International Day of People with a Disability is a United Nations observed day held each year on 3 December, and is aimed at increasing public awareness, understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities.



Find out more at

www.idpwd.com.au



Social media response to Rachael's story:



NT What an amazing nurse, the profession needs more caring empathetic nurses like this who can relate. I'd love to have shifts with a true nurse like this. Facilitators get it wrong at times. Well done and may you continue to thrive and show everyone what nursing truly is.



LW So inspiring! And what an amazing ambassador. So glad you stood strong! ❤️



JAM Thank you for sharing your inspirational story. We need more RNs like yourself who have a passion for nursing and caring for those in their time of need. 🙌



PL A real nurse not only learns through books, but they have experienced pain and challenges. You are amazing xx