

Nursing job for the boys

Health sector looks to change gender imbalances in the profession

Connie Clarke

Ian Suttie was a London musician in the late 1990s when he decided to “get a real job”. Already in his late twenties, he went back to university — choosing what some saw as an unlikely field.

“I realised our band wasn’t going to be the next Motley Crue, so it was time to find a proper career,” Mr Suttie said. “Nursing interested me because it was varied and challenging.

“I wasn’t really fazed by the stereotypes about men who went into nursing until an elderly patient asked me one day if I’d been unemployed and the government had made me go into nursing.”

Sixteen years later, he now manages two wards at Royal Perth Hospital and would not swap his job for anything.

“A lot of those old stereotypes have broken down now — I think my job is tough and I’ve witnessed some things in nursing that I would not witness in most other jobs,” he said.

“It’s very unpredictable. I could be doing paperwork one minute and propelled into a full-blown emergency situation, where we are trying to save a life, the next. I go home every night feeling like there has been some real purpose in my day.”

Despite the watering down of stereotypes just 9 per cent, or roughly 3000, of the State’s 36,440 registered nurses or midwives are men. With Fiona Stanley, Perth Children’s Hospital and Midland Public Hospital all due to open by 2015, the push to attract more men to the sector is well under way.

WA Health’s acting chief nurse and midwifery officer Brett Evans said nursing had not completely shrugged off its tag of being a job for girls but young men should not disregard a very rewarding career.

“You don’t hear people refer to someone as a ‘female nurse’, or ‘male doctor’, but for some reason we label our men as ‘male nurse’ — as if they are different,” he said.

“Many young guys disregard the option of nursing or midwifery based on

preconceived ideas about it being a job for girls, or that it’s a subservient role where the nurse or midwife wasn’t smart enough

to become another type of health professional.

“We want our nursing workforce to reflect the population we look after, so increasing the number of males is certainly a priority for us.

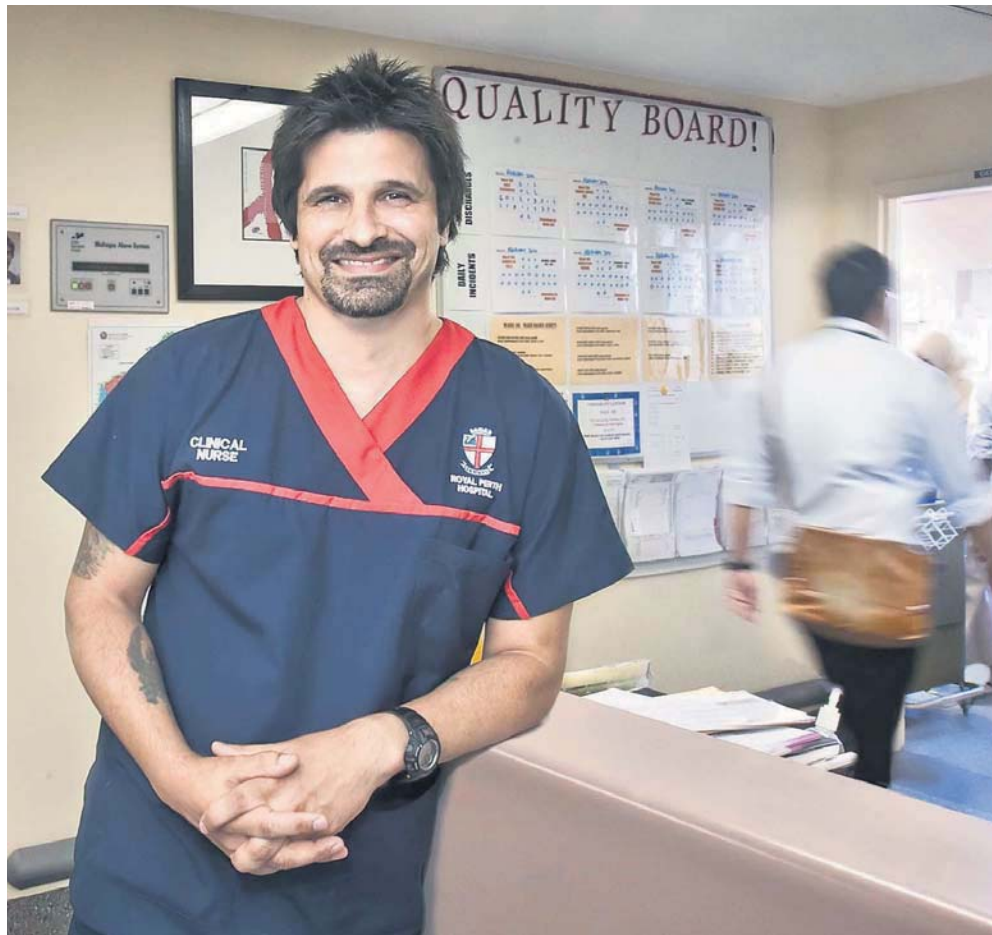
“We are working on projects that will educate everyone in the community about the real image of nursing and midwifery.

“Nurses and midwives are well paid and educated professionals who are strong leaders and astute problem solvers and not the kinds of exaggerated, two dimensional characters portrayed for dramatic or comedic effect.”

Mr Evans said men were often drawn to the more technical areas such as intensive care or emergency departments, but could be found across the healthcare system, including in mental health, education and management roles.

Gender was irrelevant to a nurse’s career path, which could take them interstate or overseas.

Publications and DVDs aimed at myth-busting some of the long held, but incorrect assumptions about nursing were being distributed to high schools across the State, while a research project with WA’s five universities was designed to better understand the barriers, perceptions and attractors for males in selecting a nursing career.



Real purpose: Acting clinical nurse specialist Ian Suttie. Picture: Steve Wise