



FROM TIME to time I am asked the question: "How can I become a senior nurse, like an area or district nursing officer?" The questioner is surprised, and not a little disappointed, when I answer: "I don't know."

The whole question of career development and personal aspiration in nursing is still somewhat haphazard. As a teenager, I remember sitting at the tea-table at home when my parents, my brothers and myself were talking about our aims in life. One brother wished to be an architect with his own firm. In the event, he did not qualify as an architect but he has his own building consultancy firm and feels he has achieved essentially what he set out to do.

I had only just entered nurse training and I dearly wished to say that I wanted to be the matron of a hospital. But I could not say that, because I knew everyone would laugh. It was not just that I was a man, even a girl would have received the same fate.

What is it about nursing, that any expression of an aspiration to achieve a top post causes smiles on the faces of some colleagues, or even open hostility in others? Whether the apparent lack of career planning in the individual is real or not, I am not quite sure. Nothing seems to be built into the system to allow talent and ability to be used at higher levels of nurse management and nurse education. Apart from the fortunes of, say, a reorganisation of the Health Service, with its extra opportunities, it is difficult to advise a young person on how to prepare for a top job.

Unless a nurse is prepared to be self-motivated it is almost certainly true that the senior posts are beyond her reach. I like the dictionary interpretation of the word "motivation" – it means "excites to action". It follows that any person preparing for a senior post must have a keen desire to achieve promotion, perhaps even a passion for it, and be highly motivated.

There is a price to be paid for all this. If married, there has to be complete understanding of what holding a senior post means – evening meetings, exhausting days, weekends of thinking through problems. Even writing a column like this, breaking off to play a game of darts with one of my boys, then back to writing with two more children and my wife building a jigsaw in the same room as me – but I am too busy

Promotion: Family vis-à-vis career

Anthony Carr, Area Nursing Officer for Newcastle upon Tyne, outlines the personal qualities needed to be a senior nurse, and says that even when at the top, there could be a high price to pay for success.

to be involved just now. Yes, there is a high price for the family to pay to be at the top.

I believe a nurse must decide early whether the price is too high. I do not criticise any person if she decides it is not worth the effort. Life does not, or should not, consist just of work. A potential senior nurse must have the ability to solve major problems without too much emotional involvement. Let me ask: "Do work problems keep you awake at night?" If so, and I say this very kindly: "Leave your job." Senior management is not for you.

Above all, a senior nurse must be able to think through problems clearly and exhibit high qualities of leadership – not to show anxiety to other staff. To show weakness in this area to subordinates is to undermine their confidence in you and the organisation. By this I do not mean that a false life has to be lived. There must be a genuine, quiet confidence at a time when everything seems to be falling apart.

Another aspect of climbing the hierarchy is that of being prepared to move home, frequently if necessary – in other words, follow the vacancies. For married and single people, especially

those with dependent relatives, this is a major obstacle. Early in my career my wife and I had to come to terms with this aspect of promotion. Finally we decided that our children (four at the time) had a right to a decent home, adequate food and clothing, reasonable education facilities and, above all, a loving home environment devoid of temper tantrums and disrespect for any member of the household.

We hoped to display at all times a loving, caring relationship in the husband and wife situation. Some of our children can remember eight homes and six different schools. Whether they have been, or are being, successful with this background is perhaps too soon to judge. Academically, the four children at present hold 39 O- and five A-levels between them with, hopefully, a further four A-levels this year. The fifth child is not old enough to have any interest in such things.

I do not judge success by this achievement alone. I doubt if anyone does. More important is whether the children are able to develop and maintain stable relationships with other people outside the family. Do they possess fully developed personalities? I think they do, but I am their father and therefore biased.

I do wonder how much career advice is given in these areas of life. To me these decisions in the personal life are much more important than taking a senior management course – more important even than having had experience at each level in the hierarchy. Management is about people, and without a secure personal background it is difficult, if not impossible, to hold a senior post very successfully.

Of course, career advice and planned development are important, if not essential, to produce a generation of able, well-equipped senior nurses. Well-educated, prepared staff are essential to run the nursing services of the future. It may just be that we concentrate too much on the planned career development and too little on what our potential leaders of the future are in terms of real people.

Next month I hope to give some advice to those who feel they could make it to the top. How can you get onto a shortlist? And how can you conduct your own interview? Make your own notes and compare them with mine □