‘The best adventure ever!’
A Spanish nurse working in the UK tells a tale of two countries

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When I finished my nursing degree in Madrid, I never imagined I would one day make Southampton my home.

Nurses in Spain have a very good, intense training. During that period, they assess the patients and help with their care and treatment. They get involved in everything: their hygiene, dressings, medication, cannulation, discharge, teaching, end of life... When they finish their degree they are independent, able to perform a wide number of techniques.

Both England and Spain have a public and a private sector and, in both, newly qualified nurses prefer to work in the public sector as the range of learning opportunities is wider. In Madrid, in order to work in a public hospital, the nurses enrol on a list where they earn points when they do training and/or work. The hospitals call the first number regardless of that person’s previous experience or preferences. Every three years, nurses can take an exam to get a permanent contract in a hospital. However, that didn’t happen from the time I finished university (2007) until 2014, so I never had a permanent contract.

As a starting point, this can be quite good: you work in very different sectors and that allows you to grow and to try different specialties. This was a positive experience until I worked in an oncology and haematology day unit where I realised oncology nursing was my passion. When the economic problems started in Spain and, as a consequence, public hospitals had fewer contracts, I started thinking about other options, as I did want to continue to work solely in oncology. That is when I applied to Southampton General Hospital. And I made the right choice!

Nursing in the UK is different. In essence, a nurse is a nurse regardless of the country, but I suffered from an initial cultural shock at the beginning. For example, I had never seen a commode before coming and now, years later, I’m not really sure how a hospital works without them. The patient-nurse ratio is better in England than in Spain and is actually something they are constantly looking at here. The support and learning opportunities are endless. I started as a supernumerary and, after that, it took me some time before I could give oral medication, more to give IV medication and even more to give chemotherapy. These and other techniques were common practice for me in Spain, but going slowly helped me to build my confidence.

As a staff nurse, I felt more supported and less independent than in Spain. Eight months later I was given an amazing opportunity to develop a new service. The hospital, in partnership with Macmillan, designed a job that included study for a Master in Advanced Clinical Practice, for which I applied and was successful: a dream job. There are no Advanced Nurse Practitioners in Spain. While there, nurses were trying to approve nurse prescribing with a lack of support from the doctors, I was being trained with the support of the senior doctors to be an independent prescriber. I started an amazing job where I could give good care to my patients, help my colleagues and embrace a new challenge.

If nurses had more support and credibility in Spain, I would never have left. There are many things I have learned that I would like to bring to Spain, and there are many other things that I try to bring to the UK from Spain. From both countries I have learned to be what I am at the moment, and I hope my experience will help other nurses from both countries and other services to improve. My bosses have always been open to changing practice based on evidence.

Patients frequently ask where I come from (because of my accent and very long surname!) but I cannot remember a single time when I have not felt welcomed by them. I regularly receive good feedback about Spain and Spanish nurses. Quite frequently, people tell me that they think coming to England to work was something brave. I think it was the best adventure ever but, at the same time, it is sad to think I could not go back home to do the amazing work I do here. While the nursing degree is better in Spain, the multidisciplinary work, and the career development opportunities for nurses, including myself, that we have in England, are still very far from being implemented in Spain.