

## Giving comfort in times of distress

July 1, 2004

### The Report: July / August 2004 vol.25 num.4

by CAROLE PEARSON



**Oluremi Ukpeh's first name** means "one who gives comfort in times of distress." No wonder physiotherapy seemed like a good career choice.

Oluremi Ukpeh Physiotherapist Steward, Royal Columbian Hospital
---

Ukpeh is a physiotherapist in the critical care unit at New Westminster's Royal Columbian Hospital, and finds it rewarding to help patients regain their physical strength and independence.

As a young woman in Nigeria, Ukpeh had pondered her options when applying to enter university. She says, "I didn't want to go into the medical school because at that time, it didn't suit me to go. I just didn't feel I was cut out for that. But, at the same time, I wanted to be involved in the care of people because I consider myself very empathetic. I was just wanting anything to do with helping people."

Physiotherapy seemed the best choice, and Ukpeh received her training with the College of Medicine at the University of Lagos.

Ukpeh came to Canada in 1995 and settled in Trail, BC. It was quite a dramatic change in her life. Nigeria has a population of more than 120 million and the capital city, Lagos, has 12 million people. Besides missing family and friends, Ukpeh misses the buoyant, bustling atmosphere of Lagos, its gorgeous beaches, her favourite foods and the wonderful flavours of locally grown fruit. "I miss the bananas, the gigantic mangoes and the plantains," she says ruefully. "They don't taste the same here."

But what Canada lacks in population, excitement and tasty tropical fruit, it makes up for in warmth. She says, "What struck me was how kind and welcoming Canadians are of others. I moved to Trail all the way from Nigeria, and I was so warmly received by everyone in that town. It was just amazing." Ukpeh appreciated the patience of people and their efforts to help her when even something as simple as renewing a driver's license seemed to entail a confusing system of line-ups and questions.

When Ukpeh moved from Trail in 2001, she found another learning experience waiting for her in New Westminster. She recalls, "This was the time our old contract was voided and the new one was being imposed by the provincial government. It evolved with us having to be on strike. That was my very first experience with any kind of strike action, and I just found it very interesting," she says. "It struck me as an opportunity to get to know, in the first place, why did they call a strike? What's the role of the union and how does the union benefit me as a professional?"

This past April, Ukpeh became an HSA steward. She explains, "I was brought up in the premise that if you want to understand how things are happening around you, you have to be involved. That was the real reason I volunteered to become a steward. I just want to be more aware of what's going on. I want to be able to contribute to the growth of my profession, and to speak up for my profession within the union when the opportunity presents itself."

In Nigeria, there are strong unions for teachers and civil servants but none for health science professionals. In Canada, Ukpeh says, she discovered how involved the union was in the professional lives of its members.

It was a new concept for her and describes it as "very, very enlightening." She adds, "I have to wonder what would life be like without the protection of guaranteed pay along with benefits. I just can't imagine how one would cope if one didn't have the body of the union to fight for these benefits."

Ukpeh attended HSA's annual convention as a shop steward, and this bolstered her decision to become more active in her union. She says, "I was extremely impressed with the convention in April. I was impressed by the depth and the scope of the knowledge of the union directors. I honestly had no idea the breadth of what the union does until I heard them at the annual general meeting. The whole experience, for me, was extremely educational."

Ukpeh adds, "I just can't help feel that if all HSA members could at least attend one convention, they would also be as impressed as I am."

Oluremi. It's also a good name for a union steward. 

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017