



# Chapter 1

## Health inequalities

### Our support is so valued by the people who receive it

#### **Introduction by Blessed Okpeki, British Red Cross volunteer**

I have volunteered at the British Red Cross's Mobility Aids Service – the biggest national provider of short-term wheelchair loans – for five years. Volunteers like me help people stay independent by providing them with wheelchairs. This service helps the British Red Cross in its mission to ensure people in the UK receive the care

and support they need without falling through gaps in the health system.

I started volunteering with the British Red Cross at a difficult time in my life. I had recently moved to Belfast where I knew no one and was struggling to find my feet. When I saw an advert for British Red Cross mobility aid volunteers in a library I applied straight away. I wanted to do something to keep me busy and give me purpose.

The British Red Cross is now like family; everyone I've met has been so good to me. The experience has helped me so much too – I have learnt a lot, both from helping people and from the people I volunteer alongside who have supported and encouraged me.

As volunteers, we're often the first point of contact for someone who is reaching out for help. People can be very distressed when they first call; they might have recently had an accident or health crisis that has restricted their mobility and left them reliant on other people. These are always emotional calls, so as well as making sure we get the right details and understand what service they need, we will listen to whatever the person is going through.

It means a lot when I see that we have brought joy into people's lives. In our office, we keep all the 'Thank You' cards that people have sent us pinned to the wall. Looking at these cards reminds me of the impact volunteers have on people's lives, and it means a lot that our support is so valued by the people who receive it. The essays in this chapter all speak about very vital and relevant issues that I have also seen through my own volunteering. Patricia Hewitt's essay says that our healthcare system needs to focus on treating the whole person and prioritise keeping people out of hospital. From my volunteering, I understand the importance of ensuring people have the support they need to stay well within their communities. The second essay, by Kim Leadbeater, is focused on loneliness, an issue of great interest to me. My experiences of moving to a new city where I knew no one leads me to agree that addressing loneliness and building connections must be a key part of the response to Covid-19. In the final essay, Ceylon Andi Hickman writes about the

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need to better support the mental health and wellbeing of young people in the UK, especially young girls. I agree that people must be supported to speak up about how they are feeling and should not be ashamed to say when they are struggling.

Volunteering for the British Red Cross gave me the motivation to get up every day, even in my darkest times. Before becoming a volunteer, I'd never thought about the need for mobility aids or how people would struggle if they weren't able to access this support.

**I hope that after the pandemic, we will continue to show kindness to each other, to build connections and to support those who might otherwise struggle on their own.**

I'm so proud of the part I have played in this work. I'm grateful for the opportunities the British Red Cross has given me, and so pleased that I have been able to help others in return.