On 5 July 2013, the NHS will celebrate its 65th birthday. The NHS is the single largest employer of black and minority ethnic (BME) people in England and has been heavily dependent upon the services of professionals from all parts of the globe since its inception.

In the run up to this significant event, the NHS Employers organisation is profiling a number of leading BME individuals, all of whom are trailblazers – pioneers, leaders and experts in their respective fields of healthcare. Together, they have blazed a trail, inspiring future generations, and helped to shape and influence developments in clinical and management practice during the last 65 years. We hope you will join us in saluting the achievements of these exceptional individuals.

Dame Karlene Davis

Dame Karlene Davis describes midwifery as life changing: it’s about bringing a new member into the family and helping the parents to adapt.

A lifelong champion of midwifery and its power to change lives in the UK and abroad, Dame Karlene has always been passionate about quality of care, humanity, kindness, listening and working with women to achieve the outcomes they want for themselves and their children.

Her work has earned her various awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011 from her colleagues for serving them throughout her career. Dame Karlene is also one of the most senior black women in the health profession today.

She believes that with prominence comes opportunity and she feels immensely privileged to have access to arenas that she would not have otherwise had, although she feels that it is a huge responsibility because people have huge expectations of her.

Brought up in Jamaica in a small town with her mother, who was a teacher, her policeman father and her younger brother, Dame Karlene was fascinated by the work that local public health nurses did in her community. Eager to get involved, she left Jamaica in 1967 to study nursing in the UK at the same time as her brother travelled to the US to learn dentistry. He was tragically killed in Vietnam, but Dame Karlene continued with her training, even more determined to succeed.

“\nIn 2001 Dame Karlene was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in recognition of her services to midwifery and the NHS.”
Starting out as a nurse, she decided to go into midwifery. Dame Karlene liked the health-based perspective that midwifery offered and enjoyed dealing with women and their families at a very significant time in their lives. She realised that this was what she was meant to do.

Early in her career, Dame Karlene said she did not have the same protection that today’s equality legislation offers and people did take liberties. As a black female she found this especially challenging. She aimed to ensure that she was on top of her game all of the time so that she would be accepted and recognised for what she did. Dame Karlene knew that she was articulate and her work was outstanding. She spoke up and spoke out, gaining excellent qualifications, and was noticed for her hard work.

In 1997, Dame Karlene took a position as the general secretary and chief executive of The Royal College of Midwives and this allowed her to work at a national level on improving the level of care that women received. She believed that people should be able to raise concerns without becoming victims and this was how her trade union work came into her midwifery professional practice. She sees the recognition she was able to create for midwifery and its contribution to the nation as her biggest achievement during that time.

In the same year, she was appointed director of the World Health Organisation’s Collaborating Centre for Midwifery. The centre opened up midwifery as a career in countries where it was not recognised as separate to nursing and showed that maternal and child health was a route to improving health among populations. As director, Dame Karlene could influence the work going on internationally. For example, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) she worked with the educationalist to prepare the midwifery profession to meet European Union standards. Driven by her desire to ensure a high quality of care for women regardless of whether they were in a rich or poor country, she also helped to create a toolkit for delivering maternity care in war-torn areas.

After dedicating her life to midwifery, Dame Karlene has now retired and welcomes a life without constraints. She plans to spend time with her new 19-month-old grandson and family, take on some more voluntary work, do some travelling and in her own words, ‘chill’.

Did you know?

1. In 2001 Dame Karlene was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in recognition of her services to midwifery and the NHS.
2. Dame Karlene’s favourite theatre production is The Lion King, for the stage set and dramatics.
3. The most terrifying thing that Dame Karlene has ever done is horse riding in Denmark – she says she spent more time on the ground than on the saddle!