

Our Virtual Ward improves patient flow at Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

The introduction of a Virtual Ward service (formerly known as HaH's Early Supported Discharge service) has allowed Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust to respond quickly and efficiently to the recent COVID-19 challenge while significantly improving patient outcomes all year round.

As part of its winter planning process in 2017, the trust had been looking at ways to ensure there was sufficient capacity to meet the increased demand for beds and enough staff to improve patient flow during the challenging winter period.

In response, it launched its Virtual Ward service in partnership with Healthcare at Home in February 2018.

The trust provides acute care, including inpatient and outpatient treatment, A&E facilities, and specialist services. As with many NHS trusts, managing bed occupancy rates is a perennial issue. High levels of bed occupancy can have a major impact, causing delays and cancellations because it reduces the number of beds available to all other patients.

Virtual Ward is the facilitation of a patient from hospital to their own home, coordinated by a team of doctors, nurses, healthcare support workers and therapists. Medical care and treatment and any specialist rehabilitation required are then provided in the patient's own home.

The advantage of the Virtual Ward service is that it improves the flow of patients from hospital to home with little or no disruption to their medical care and treatment.

'The service allows patients to continue their clinical treatment and any ongoing rehabilitation seamlessly in the comfort of their own home,' explains Duane McLean, former Chief of the Family Health Division and Chief Pharmacist at the trust.*

'There is no question that patients do better at home. They recover more quickly and have improved outcomes. Virtual Ward ensures patients benefit from high-quality care, tailored to their specific needs, delivered with the same expertise and level of intensity they would receive in a hospital setting. It also boosts patient satisfaction, giving our patients choices about where they would rather receive treatment, and reducing the amount of time they must spend in hospital away from their loved ones.

'The trust benefits greatly by improving patient flow, easing any capacity pressures, and realising cost and resource efficiencies. The ability to effectively optimise the use of hospital beds helps to reduce treatment delays and cancellations and lowers the number of unnecessary readmissions. It's a win-win situation.'

Initially, the Virtual Ward service started with 10 patients in February 2018, but by June, that had more than doubled to 28 patients, and by November 2019, the service was meeting the needs of 40–50 patients per month. More recently, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the service was caring for approximately 80–100 patients at any given time.

*Duane is now the Deputy Chief Operating Officer – Emergency Pathways at Nottingham University Hospitals



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A multi-disciplinary approach

The Virtual Ward service provides first-class clinical care and rehabilitative therapies for non-critical patients who can be treated at home, while under the close supervision of their hospital consultant. There are no exclusion criteria – patients with a wide range of medical conditions, including severe long-term issues, can benefit from the service. These include patients from trauma and orthopaedics and general surgery including ENT, as well as general medicine, encompassing diabetes, stroke, cardiology, neurology, and many more.

The service fully complements the trust's existing clinical provisions, ensuring patients can continue to receive treatment and therapies. These include intravenous antibiotics, blood monitoring, complex wound care, drain and catheter care, physiotherapy, rehabilitation, and specialist care, such as the diabetic foot clinic.

Duane explains: 'It's hard to differentiate the Healthcare at Home team from our clinical teams on-site. They are now an integral part of our day-to-day patient care, 100% focused on the health and wellbeing of our patients and helping us to achieve more efficient use of our resources. That is a tribute to the expert, compassionate, dedicated work Healthcare at Home's nurses, healthcare support workers, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists put in every day.'

For more information about the support we can offer our NHS partners during times of increased demand, please contact Steve Spencer, National Commercial Manager, on **07545 657 717** or email steven.spencer@hah.co.uk

Responding to COVID-19

The Virtual Ward service proved invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping the trust adapt quickly and innovatively in a challenging and rapidly moving situation.

The Virtual Ward teams remained fully operational throughout, maintaining essential treatment and care pathways from hospital to home. Multi-disciplinary team meetings with consultants took place virtually to support clinical decision-making, prioritise early and safe discharges of appropriate patients and agree on vital care and rehabilitation plans.

'The Virtual Ward service staff worked extra hours, cancelled their leave and went the extra mile to manage our response to the virus and ensure both COVID-19 positive patients and non-COVID-19 patients received an excellent standard of care both on-site at the hospital and in their own homes,' says Duane.

'Patients were triaged, enabling those in most need to be prioritised, in line with local infection control and PPE guidance, while vulnerable patients shielding at home benefitted from the continuity of care from highly trained, skilled staff with access to full PPE at all times.'

The Virtual Ward service has evolved to become an intrinsic part of the trust's operations. It is now a fully integrated, cost-efficient care system that continues to reap significant benefits for patients and clinicians alike.

'Healthcare at Home provides an excellent service and working with them is a pleasure. They are adaptable, compassionate, and dedicated. What I particularly value from the team is their ability to challenge our internal practices and engage openly so that we continually raise the bar, enhancing the treatment and care pathways for all our patients.'

Duane McLean

Former Chief of the Family Health Division and Chief Pharmacist
Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

