Why virtual wards are key to reducing hospital admissions this winter

A virtual frailty ward run by Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust has successfully helped over 1,244 patients in Berkshire avoid being admitted to local hospitals by treating them at home and monitoring them remotely.

Earlier this month Health Secretary Steve Barclay said that virtual wards, designed to reduce hospital admissions and speed up early discharge, are key to freeing up hospital beds.

First introduced in April 2022, Berkshire Healthcare's virtual frailty ward sees multi-disciplinary clinical teams delivering acute hospital care for frail or elderly patients with common acute medical problems such chest infections, urinary tract infections, dehydration, or cellulitis, and safely providing treatment at their home or care home, rather than in hospital.

The virtual frailty wards provide the same level of high-quality patient care, with access to the same investigations and treatment that patients would receive in hospital. Patients are closely monitored which enable clinicians to recognise early deterioration and adjust treatment if needed.

This approach benefits the patients by providing more personalised care and giving them the choice to remain at home and be treated in a more comfortable home environment. The length of stay on the virtual frailty ward of around 4-5 days is also generally much shorter than in a hospital ward bed.

Virtual frailty wards can be offered to patients referred from Urgent Community Response, acute hospitals, GPs, care homes - or to those who have been admitted to a hospital ward but have improved enough to go home with additional monitoring, allowing hospital beds to be made available for other patients.

Joanne Blackburn, Head of Community Ageing Well Services, at Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust said:
"Virtual Frailty Wards are key to reducing hospital admissions this winter as they create capacity to treat more patients at a time where there is increased demand and pressure on services. Virtual Frailty Wards have enabled us to deliver a better experience for our patients by giving them the choice to remain at home and be treated in a familiar and comfortable environment, which leads to improved patient outcomes.

"By providing an alternative to admission or early discharge, Virtual Frailty Wards aim to narrow the gap between demand and capacity for secondary care beds. Patients are able to maintain their independence in familiar surroundings, which can reduce recovery times. Being at home means the discharge process is quicker and simpler. Avoiding an unnecessary unplanned hospital admission can also reduce the risk of contracting other infections, such as viruses."

A family member of one virtual frailty ward patient said: *"We received excellent care, Mum would much rather be at home, the care she has received feels kind and loving, rather than clinical, and has meant we can be with her"*.

How virtual frailty wards work

Once a patient has been referred, a Senior Nurse Practitioner aims to be at their home within two hours. On arrival, they will do a full medical assessment and carry out any tests required. The team will discuss a treatment plan, and any additional investigations such as X-rays and scans will be organised at a local community hospital.

Once a plan has been established, a combination of clinical professionals work together to deliver care to ensure the best outcomes for the patient. Berkshire Healthcare's frailty virtual ward multi-disciplinary team includes a consultant, pharmacist, advanced clinical nurse practitioners, experienced senior nurses, multi therapy assistants and physiotherapists.

Patients on the virtual frailty ward are reviewed daily and discussed with the consultant, with amendments to care plans made accordingly. Upon discharge, the patient is referred back to the care of their GP who receives an update on the treatment delivered by the team.

For more information visit www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/UCR

Notes to Editors

1. **About Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust** Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust provides specialist mental health and community health services to a population of around 900,000 within Berkshire. We operate from more than 100 sites across the county but the vast majority of the people we care for are supported in their own homes. We have 216 mental health inpatient beds and 180 community hospital beds in five locations. Visit www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk

2. The Trust is rated by the **CQC as Outstanding.**

3. **Follow Berkshire Healthcare** on Twitter @BHFT, Facebook www.facebook.com/berkshirehealthcare and on Instagram @berkshealthnhs