Northern Care Alliance sets up 500 bed virtual ward

The Northern Care Alliance is setting up one of the UK's biggest virtual wards. Its appointed medical technology specialist, Dignio, will provide the technology to monitor more than 500 patients in their own homes.

The virtual ward project will cover a large part of the Greater Manchester area and the virtual beds will be available to patients with a variety of different conditions and helping to reduce the post COVID-19 elective backlog.

The latest virtual ward pilot follows a year-long 'virtual clinic' trial which saw heart failure patients, who had reduced hospital check-ups during the Covid-19 pandemic, being monitored remotely, following the introduction of a state-of-the-art digital care solution.

Healthcare teams at Salford Care Organisation, part of the Northern Care Alliance NHS Foundation Trust and Dignio, piloted the use of remote monitoring, which used a smartphone app and easy-to-use connected Bluetooth devices.

As with the original pilot scheme, the new 500 bed virtual ward will see patients being given access to the MyDignio App to record their vital signs. The data can be reviewed and monitored by the healthcare team and thresholds for alerts set on an individual patient basis. It means that when something falls outside an acceptable range, clinicians are alerted.

The successful pilot empowered patients to self-manage and record their weight and blood pressure between appointments. Although evaluation of the scheme is ongoing, preliminary findings suggest that it reduced hospital admissions, within the patient base of the pilot, by 30 per cent.

Ian Hogan, Chief Information Officer for digitally integrated care at the Northern Care Alliance, said: "After such a successful pilot scheme, and the national initiative for implementation of virtual bedded wards, it was clear that working with Dignio has the potential to offer our patients a different type of healthcare intervention.

"One that gives control to them, in their most familiar environment. It also offers a level of empowerment with regards to their condition management and ongoing assessment of condition specific observations all under the watchful eye of our clinicians and supported by the artificial intelligence within the Dignio platform and the personalised tolerances it offers.

"Patient feedback from the pilot has been really positive and engaging and the broader engagement across our clinical colleagues has garnered support and rethinking of clinical pathways to better support patient care and experience."

Dr Jim Ritchie, Chief Clinical Informatics Officer at the Northern Care Alliance, said: "Tools such as Dignio are allowing our clinical teams to develop new models of care that should improve experiences and outcomes for patients. Being able to see and act on real time information about complex health problems such as kidney and heart diseases enables quicker optimisation of treatments, faster action where problems are developing, and lets staff maximise the impact of their time in clinic."

Originally developed in Norway, the app and the remote care solution has been widely used across the country for monitoring patients with a variety of long-term health conditions. Dr Ewa Truchanowicz, Dignio UK Managing Director said: "We are really pleased to be continuing our work with the Northern Care Alliance. We

focus on empowering patients with more knowledge about their disease and tools for self-management in order to slow disease progression and to reduce preventable admissions."

"Our partnerships with the NHS help us ensure that our solution meets the needs of the diverse users whom it helps. Our award-winning technology is constantly evolving in response to feedback and we value enormously the opportunity to continue working with our Northern Care Alliance colleagues. We are honoured to help them optimise how and where the best quality care is delivered to their patients."

The new virtual ward project will build on the success of the original pilot scheme and will also help to reduce the backlog in elective care within the NHS built up as direct result of from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding for the latest virtual ward is coming from the Government's 'Elective Recovery Technology Fund' which is designed to provide NHS trusts with an opportunity to transform the way they provide services to patients.

The recently published 'Tackling the backlog of elective care' policy document suggested that digital technology would help to free up capacity with tech-supported COVID-19 virtual wards extended to cater for a wide range of conditions. It means that more hospital beds are available for those needing inpatient care.

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