
Support to Devon Carers is recognised nationally. “It’s already a winner,” says Lead Councillor

A pioneering new project that supports unpaid carers has been heralded nationally and is shortlisted for a prestigious care award.

It involves dedicated staff from Devon Carers, a service commissioned by Devon County Council and NHS Devon CCG, working closely with hospital teams to identify situations where carers are involved, and where support for those carers is needed for patients to return home safely, or prevent hospital admissions.

First piloted at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, the Carers Hospital Service is now also running in North Devon and Torbay Hospitals.

There are an estimated 130,000 people in Devon who are looking after family members, neighbours or friends. Devon Carers, which is run by Exminster-based Westbank, support around 20,000 carers, (around 15 per cent). While support for carers is available, reaching them has always been difficult because people’s caring roles are often not identified.

So the authorities and Devon Carers started working within hospitals, and as patients came forward and their situations were assessed, it was possible to see whether they had anyone looking after them, a family member say, at home.

Sometimes people are unable to leave hospital because the person who is caring for them at home has become unable to cope. It might be because the patients’ care needs have grown worse and the carer doesn’t know what to do, or the carer could be unwell themselves, or simply exhausted from providing round the clock care.

Having identified where there are carers involved, the Carers Hospital Service team works with them to understand what is happening and to see where support would help them, which might avoid a hospital admission or help get the person home more quickly.

Often, emotional help and supportive calls from the staff is enough reassurance for some carers. Other times it could include specific training in a particular condition such as dementia. There could be practical support with cleaning or arranging meal deliveries for example, and sometimes putting the carer in touch with local groups or individuals who have shared experience of caring.

If the carer's health is poor, or they have developed care needs themselves, the team refer the carer to health or social care services.

The results have shown significant improvements. By supporting carers, they are more able to look after themselves as well as caring for their loved one, neighbour or friend. In turn, that is preventing further hospital admissions, and reducing the length of time that patients are in hospital because they are able to return home sooner.

Between April 2019 and the end of October this year, 2,193 carers have been helped by the Carers Hospital Service, 1,740 of which were previously not known to Devon Carers.

One carer said:

“The cleaning and food delivery has meant that I am able to go back to work, whilst mum recuperates and dad is looked after. Thank you so much, I was finding it so difficult to cope. I would like to say a huge thank you for all the help that you have given to both my parents and myself over the past months. I don't know I would have managed to cope with this whole caring process and trying to work as well. It's very much appreciated, and you seem to have gone beyond the call of duty.”

Another carer said:

“I was just finding it so difficult to juggle all aspects of care with everything else that is going on at the moment. Debbie calmly went through everything that I needed to do and also tried to take some of that responsibility off my hands so that I could breathe a bit.”

The Carers Hospital Service has been shortlisted for the Support for Carers category of this year’s prestigious Health Service Journal awards.

Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, Devon County Council’s Cabinet Member with responsibility adult social care and health, said:

“Many of us in life find ourselves at some point looking after a family member or a friend, who needs care and support, and that’s to be expected. Why wouldn’t we.

“Often though, it can become all-consuming, and the impact that it has on our lives can be significant if the impact is not recognised.

“Through this pilot, we have seen how sometimes even a little support can go a very long way in helping a person cope with caring for their mum or dad, husband or wife, or someone else.

“The affect that has on the carer is enormous in terms of reducing their anxiety, stress levels and to some extent any feelings of guilt they may feel should they find themselves no longer able to cope.

“From the patients’ point of view, it means that many get to go home sooner, and it has often prevented their return to hospital at a later date because the person caring for them is now better able to cope.

“Of course home is where we would all want to be cared for, and carers enable that to happen, contributing hugely to the work done by health or social care services.

“We estimate that supporting carers in this way, enabling them to carry on caring safely, is saving the health and social care system in Devon considerably each year.

“More importantly supporting carers in this way is better for their wellbeing, as well as the people that they are caring for.

“I am delighted that our pilot in Devon has been recognised nationally, and is shortlisted for one of the most prestigious care awards in the country, the Health Service Journal awards.

“We will wait to hear what the judges think, but the positive results and comments we receive back from local carers already tells me that this service is a winner.”

Billy Hartstein, Head of Devon Carers, said:

“We are thrilled that Devon Carers Hospital Service has been nominated for a Health Service Journal Award in recognition of the hard and diligent work of Simon Rapsey, Tracy Duckmanton and all the Hospital Service Team.

“Our Hospital Service is the result of ongoing communication with unpaid carers, Carers Ambassadors and our fantastic partnership with Devon County Council and the NHS Devon CCG.

“Our integrated approach to developing this service has resulted in this innovative project to support unpaid carers. We continually review and adapt the services we offer to ensure we meet the needs of unpaid carers and who they care for, providing the right help when they need it most. We hope that as the needs of unpaid carers continue to change, we respond quickly by developing new areas of work.

“Thank you to the Health Service Journal judges for shortlisting our Devon Carers Hospital Service.”