
Devon Carers win National Award

Scheme that has supported unpaid carers during pandemic wins national award

A new project that supports unpaid carers has received a national award for its 'outstanding contribution to healthcare' during the height of the pandemic. The Carers Hospital Service was awarded the System Led Support for Carers Award at the 40th Health Service Journal Awards 2020 for supporting thousands of unpaid carers.

The awards saw more than 4500 health and social care staff celebrate the dedication, innovation, and teamwork within the health care community. The Carers Hospital Service sees staff from Devon Carers, commissioned by Devon County Council and NHS Devon CCG, work alongside hospital teams to identify circumstances where unpaid carers are involved. From there they identify where support is needed to help patients to return home safely, or to 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. Between April 2019 and January this year, 3,900 carers were helped by the Carers Hospital Service, three quarters of whom were not previously known to be carers. There are up 130,000 people in Devon who are looking after family members, neighbours or friends. Devon Carers, which is run by Exminster-based charity Westbank, supports around 20,000 carers.

While support for carers is available, reaching them has always been difficult because people's caring roles are often not identified. So, 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, like a family member, looking after them at home. Sometimes people are unable to leave hospital because the person who is caring for them at home has become unable to cope or the patients' care needs have grown, and the carer doesn't know what to do.

In some cases a carer could be unwell themselves, or simply exhausted from providing round the clock care without a break. Once the involvement of carers has been determined, the Carers Hospital Service team works with them to determine what kind of support would best help them. Sometimes emotional help and supportive calls from the staff is enough; on other occasions

being put in touch with local groups or individuals who have shared experience of caring helps. Immediate short term and simple practical help often makes all the difference.

On other occasions longer-term help is needed, and this is provided by Devon Carers, or where social care is needed, by Devon's health and social care services. By supporting carers, they are more able to look after themselves and in turn better able to care for their loved one or friend. This support also prevents further hospital admissions, and reduces the length of time that patients are in hospital because they are able to return home sooner.

The judges said: "(Devon County Council and the NHS Devon CCG, the RD&E and Devon Carers) have shown extraordinary integration with the leadership of carers being critical to the work that has been achieved. There is a strong culture of trust and esteem across the system partners and their teams where carers are confident that commitments will be followed through. The programme produced outstanding health and well-being outcomes for carers and provided clear benefits to the sustainability of health and care services..."

Sue Younger-Ross, Joint Carers Lead Devon County Council NHS Devon Clinical Commissioning Group said: "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.

"It's an understatement to say that this year has been challenging. It has undoubtedly been one of the most demanding on record for the NHS and those who work in the health and care sector.

"So, to be recognised in this way means a great deal to all involved. This Award will provide a tremendous boost to both staff and patients and I am sure it will bolster our efforts to develop and continually improve our services."

Billy Hartstein, Head of Devon Carers, said: "Thank you to the Health Service Journal judges for recognising the dedication and hard work of the Carers Hospital Services Team at Devon Carers.

"As with all our services, unpaid carers, carer ambassadors and our partners at Devon County Council and the NHS Devon CCG have worked with us throughout and have been instrumental in ensuring our Carers Hospital Service is a success.

"We have assessed and provided support to almost 4,000 unpaid carers, which has enabled the person they care for to confidently return home from the hospital with relevant support in place.

“We are proud to have been able to make our Carers Hospital Service an integrated part of the offer available to unpaid carers at Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital and North Devon Hospitals.”