

Reflections

Jan Turnbull, the Chair of Friends of Swanage Community Hospital, Dorset reflects on 2020/21

During 2020 three wonderful projects we had financed were completed but we were unable to show them off to the public. For years we had been wanting to build under the ward area of the hospital, create a patient garden and a car park and in 2019 we had got the go-ahead. We feared that work would stop when lockdown hit but, because it was outside the hospital, it was able to continue. It would cost us £1.2 million pounds and resulted in a new conference room, staff room, storage areas and a bed sitting room for relatives of palliative care patients. A lift was installed to allow patients to access the newly created garden and the car park would ease congestion on the roads around the hospital. At least the hospital staff and patients were able to enjoy the new amenities and finally on 15th September 2021 we held an Open Garden event and people were thrilled by the transformation.

It has been so strange not being able to visit the hospital but we were kept up to date by our Matron and were able to send in treats for staff at various times throughout the years. But seeing the hospital front door locked and an appointment only system for our MIU was difficult to accept, particularly as we learned from the CHA that in other parts of the country walk-in MIUs were actually increasing their opening hours.

But in September we learned that in Dorset the MIUs would remain as an appointment only service permanently. We were horrified and I turned to the CHA for advice and learned that not only was this not happening in other Counties but also the NHS website itself explained how NHS 111 First was for people who were not sure where to go for treatment but you could still walk into an MIU.

In Dorset we have created a Network of the Chairs of the Friends of our Community Hospitals and we agreed to challenge this proposed permanent change of access. My committee decided we must collect evidence of how people were affected and we emailed our members, posted on the local Facebook page and wrote to the local press. In just a few weeks we received 47 patient stories all of which showed that having to ring 111 and try to make an appointment to go to our MIU was causing distress, anxiety, wasted time before treatment and added to the burden on other providers, particularly A & E.

The evidence was sent to our Trust and meetings were held. I am delighted to report that our hospital front doors are now unlocked and local people are able to walk in once again. We accept that MIU staff will be triaging and if it's safe to wait then some patients may be asked to make appointments to come back. But common sense has prevailed and we sincerely hope that putting the needs of patients first will always be the priority, even in a pandemic.

Now comes the challenge of trying to get some of our lost services back. For example we are told there will be no day surgery any more but hopefully an Endoscopy Service if we fit a new ventilation system in our theatre (yes, we've agreed to pay for it). Outpatient lists are now managed by the Acute hospital, we have some clinics running but far from all of the ones we used to have. It seems the battles are never ending and sadly we have now lost our full time Matron and our part time one has to travel over 45 minutes between her two hospitals and that's in Winter. It can take twice as long in Summer. At a time when leadership is so vital it is another issue we are going to have to tackle whilst all the while

wondering how the NHS is going to cope with the changes in management coming next April.

Will the Integrated Care Systems be a good thing for the future of community hospitals? Surely it ought to be with the focus on reorganising services to provide more in the community. We can only hope.

With thanks to Jan for sharing with the CHA members her experiences and the Friends contribution to Swanage Community Hospital.