

## Making 'virtual visiting' a reality for COVID-19 patients

### Cambridgeshire NHS Foundation Trust (United Kingdom)

#### What was the challenge?

As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Cambridgeshire, UK, one hospital trust put in place strict infection control measures to minimise the risk of transmission and protect its staff and patients, meaning that the relatives and carers of patients were unable to physically visit the hospital.

#### What was the task?

In response to the visiting restrictions, Intensive Care teams at the NHS Trust developed new ways of helping coronavirus patients communicate virtually with their relatives, including the 'Relatives Communications' Team. This team comprises critical care nurses who have had to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic for shielding purposes; critical care nurses working on site in the hospital; ICU consultants and the hospital's faith leaders.

Requests for information sharing are taken by staff working with the hospital's ICUs. Home-based staff in the 'Relative Communications' team then operate via telephone, video calling and email to share important information and practical advice with families and carers of patients admitted to the hospital's four ICUs. In addition, the 'Relatives Communications' Team has put in place arrangements for 'virtual visiting'. For the first time in the hospital, it is now possible for families and patients using video calling and iPads to communicate whilst being separated.

#### What was the action taken?

As part of their mission, 'Relative Communications' Team seeks to ensure that every patient in a critical care unit has access to the personal messaging service and for video calls to relatives or carers using an iPad. On site staff administering the video calls were supported to use video calling and the iPads through dedicated training provided by the 'Relatives Communications' Team.

Initially, the NHS Trust already had some iPads in use in different parts of the hospital, which were repurposed (where possible) for 'virtual visiting'. Thanks to support from organisations including the NHS Trust's charity and local not-for-profit groups, 15 new iPads were gifted for 'virtual visiting', enabling more equitable access across different intensive care units.

#### What were the results?

Transforming the traditional approach to hospital visiting demonstrated multiple benefits, including:

- Patients in critical care units felt less isolated and incurred reduced stress from not being able to communicate with relatives and carers.
- Improved communication between family and carers with ICU staff regarding about patients' preferences (such as how they preferred to be addressed).
- Reducing the adverse impact on relatives and carers of not being able to visit their loved one before death, and ensuring that where possible, patients can say goodbye to loved ones or meet with a faith leader.
- Increased opportunity for staff to more quickly relay important information regarding a patient's condition, treatment options, etc.

Although the 'virtual visiting' service was established to deal with the immediate impacts of restricted hospital visiting during the coronavirus pandemic, the 'Relatives Communications' Team anticipate that it will continue as a way for families and patients to keep in touch in the future. This new model will benefit patients who may have relatives or carers without access to transport, who are living in rural areas or who are unable to travel to an inpatient ward.