

Submission by the Community Hospitals Association (CHA) to the Health and Social Care Committee's Expert panel: evaluation of palliative care in England.

The Community Hospitals Association (CHA) is a membership organisation that acts as the voice of community hospitals in the UK. There are around 500 community hospitals in the UK serving predominantly small towns and rural populations. These small hospitals provide care near to patients' homes and are champions of integrated health care linking primary care, community services, inpatient care and secondary care (through outpatient clinics and surgical services).

Provision of palliative care and end of life care have always been core functions of community hospitals. This submission addresses the headings of Delivery of palliative care and end of life care in England and Shifting to the community.

Delivery of palliative care and end of life care in England.

Ever since their inception, community hospitals have been offering care at the end of life and over recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on the provision of palliative care in terms of pain and symptoms control, psychological and spiritual support. For patients some distance from specialist palliative care services (including inpatient facilities) the community hospital acts as a rural hospice. Many community hospitals have retained their beds despite an erosion in bed numbers over the past two decades. Inpatients very often are cared for by nursing and medical staff they know and have a relationship with. Such continuity of care is much valued by patients and their carers. Some community hospitals have dedicated palliative care beds with staff specifically trained in symptom control and end of life care. To our knowledge, all community hospitals have access to community specialist palliative care support and it is common practice for specialist nurses to visit inpatients.

Shifting to the community.

Community hospitals are viewed by the communities they serve as 'their hospital' and very much part of that community. Families may have had loved ones who have died in the hospital and know staff members or indeed been employed by the hospital. The strength of local ownership is demonstrated by

the commitment of the many League of Friends who support their hospital and indeed by the strength of protest seen whenever a community hospital service comes under threat. Community hospitals integrate well with local community health services often hosting community nursing teams, admission avoidance (to acute hospital) teams, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Although the majority of people with life threatening illness wish to die at home this is not always possible. However, admission to a community hospital, embedded within the community is often seen as a preferable to admission to an acute hospital, which sadly is still the fate of many people.

We feel that community hospitals should be viewed as very much part of the community and distinct from acute hospital services and specialist inpatient care services.

Evidence.

The quality of end of life care in community hospitals is being measured by the National Audit of Care at the End of Life (NACEL) with an increasing number of hospitals participating in each audit cycle.

For further information about quality assurance in UK community hospitals and links to relevant research papers please visit www.communityhospitals.org.uk

Conclusion.

We would ask the Select Committee to acknowledge the contribution that the community hospitals of England (and indeed the whole United Kingdom) make towards the provision of palliative care and end of life care in the NHS. These hospitals are overlooked and undervalued as witnessed by the significant erosion of inpatient beds and closures of hospitals. At a time when the NHS has too few beds, especially for the elderly, frail and those facing the end of life, we would contend that community hospitals be seen as a vital resource in providing palliative care and end of life care especially for those in rural and remote communities.

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