

CSJ

THE CLINICAL SERVICES JOURNAL



Rapid creation of a surgical hub to reduce waiting lists

Rapid creation of a surgical hub to reduce waiting lists

As delays for elective surgery continue to grow nationally, compounded by the winter pressures being experienced by most Trusts and health boards, **Chris Blackwell-Frost** speaks with key people at South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust, about how they established a surgical hub for elective orthopaedic surgery in a Vanguard mobile laminar flow theatre.

A successfully implemented surgical hub provides many benefits to individuals and to organisations, contributing towards the meeting of the NHS's most important objectives. The headline is a reduction in waiting times for elective surgery and often this is for the Trust upon whose site the hub is located and for neighbouring Trusts. A surgical hub, because of the scheduled nature of its procedures, is also recognised to be a great environment for training. The timely completion of elective procedures also has knock-on effects for other areas of the NHS and for wider society.

As Glen Burley, Chief Executive, South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust, says, "There's a relationship between shorter elective waits and urgent care, particularly in orthopaedics. So, if we can manage those individual patients, they're less likely to come in as an emergency, which has a bigger financial impact for the NHS and is a bad outcome. Just being able to mobilise, so that they're able to live active, independent lives...The ongoing burden on the NHS when they're not, is really significant."

Harkamal Heran, Chief Operating Officer at South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust, agrees. "We don't want patients coming to us via our Emergency Department. We want them here on an elective waiting list, having received really, really good pre-op, healthy, fit, willing and able to receive the treatment and then go home as quickly as possible," Harkamal comments.

"From our perspective, patients get seen sooner and it's a great experience for them. We don't want patients to be waiting too long to get that treatment. We know that people can live between 16 and 20 years in ill-health in this area and that has a real cost and a real impact on our local economy.

"So, helping people get their operations sooner, get mobilised sooner, get back to work or get back to not needing quite so much support, feels really important, and trying to reduce time spent



The outside of the Vanguard laminar flow theatre, in position at Warwick hospital.

in ill-health is absolutely a driver for us."

The hub at Warwick Hospital, opened in August and immediately achieved four orthopaedic procedures per day, and five on occasion. Before the hub was established, South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust was already one of the better performing Trusts when considering RTT (Referral to Treatment Times), especially in the T&O (Trauma and Orthopaedic) category.

Asked about the motivation for investing in the hub, Glen, comments, "Firstly, we've got capacity to help the rest of the NHS. While we're very focused on keeping waiting times down as much as we can locally, there's a huge opportunity to improve waiting times in organisations around us. There's a number of Trusts that have got some really long waits and their patients could come here quite easily for surgery."

Harkamal makes the point that as South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust is one of the best in the country in the T&O category, it makes sense to continue to invest in this area, especially taking into account the Trust's experience in providing mutual aid.

This hub is unusual in that it is on an Emergency Department and trauma site. This can create additional complications, particularly

in protecting resources allocated to elective work, as Tim Robertson, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust, explains: "You need a degree of ring fencing in a constructive way, so that you can have a lot of elective flows of patients which aren't being interrupted with traumas and the day-to-day emergencies. Because we're an acute Trust, that could be a pressure point for us."

Glen acknowledges these challenges and believes that within close proximity to these services is the right place to undertake surgery, especially when considering the age profile of the Trust's patients and the potential for complications to the surgery. "Being on a site that has physicians, and elderly care physicians, on it, is important. I also think it's really important for the NHS to utilise all of its theatre capacity, and probably 90% of theatres are on acute sites. If we give up on being able to get productivity out of acute sites, we will face quite a bit of trouble", he says.

Ring-fencing the resources for elective care is important to the success of the surgical hub and in line with the Trust's philosophy that it simply does not cancel elective activity. Harkamal expounds on this: "We do not cancel electives for beds related pressures. So, we

wouldn't put emergency patients into elective bed capacity. The only reason we would ever need to cancel is if the patient isn't fit or there's an unexpected issue with equipment, for example. However, as a rule, we would never cancel electives, even in winter, and that's why it makes sense to put the Vanguard (theatre) closer to the ward, because we know we're not going to be using it for anything else anyway."

Maximising productivity is key to the success of a surgical hub and to addressing the nation's backlog in elective surgery, and exclusively using the resources for the surgical hub is one of several ways in which South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust maximises efficiency.

It was possible to create the elective hub within weeks because the laminar flow theatre is a mobile facility provided by Vanguard Healthcare Solutions, linked to the hospital by a specially constructed corridor.

Harkamal explains how deciding where the theatre is located was important: "We built a corridor right off the orthopaedic elective ward and it really does improve the patient journey. Patients can visualise where they're going, and that journey is just a lot more streamlined. Every micro gain that you can make in any kind of theatre pathway really adds to the productivity and the overall efficiency."

Multiple benefits come from this. Harkamal continues, "That's why we've made the decision to put the theatre there. So far, we haven't lost a single joint. We don't overrun, so the staff experience is much better. We start on time. That's obviously better for staff and patients. So, it makes sense to try and do as much close to the patient, as you can."

Harkamal recognises that staff responsible for patient management play a key role in ensuring the theatre is fully utilised: "We're good at that here, you know, our T&O booking team, for example, are excellent. They've been

We know that people can live between 16 and 20 years in ill-health in this area and that has a real cost and a real impact on our local economy. So, helping people get their operations sooner, get mobilised sooner, get back to work or get back to not needing quite so much support, feels really important, and trying to reduce time spent in ill-health is absolutely a driver for us.

Harkamal Heran, South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust.



Harkamal Heran, (left), and Glen Burley, (right), either side of Chris Blackwell-Frost, CEO, Vanguard Healthcare Solutions.

validating all the way down. We know exactly what's happening with our patients. We know when they are ready to be here. We know if they have anything coming up that we need to work around. That's really important and has been really key to us maximising our lists.

"We have had, in the last couple of weeks, patients not being very well but we have a whole group of patients who are ready to come in at short notice. We ring them in the morning and then they come in. Therefore, we haven't lost a single opportunity to operate since the Vanguard (theatre) has been here, and we've just adopted the same approach for patients that we offer mutual aid to. We add them to our list, and we manage them in the exact same

way that we would ordinarily."

Length of stay has obvious implications for productivity. Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon, Tim Robertson says that a joint replacement is increasingly a day case, and that length of stay is consequently shortening. As well as the positive impact of freeing up beds, this also benefits patients.

Harkamal says, "As soon as you are operated on, you want to go home and start your rehab journey. We are looking to see what more we can do in terms of any additional cases and that's starting to ramp up already because we know that we can create the bed capacity to bring more patients in, as and when appropriate. It's about optimising the pre-op and then the post-op rehab, and getting patients home is a really, very key part of that." Tim comments. "Historically, we've had what we call our SWATT, which is our South Warwickshire Accelerated Transfer Team – a team of nurses and physios who have been able to take patients out from hospital earlier and when necessary, go and see them at home, phone them up and manage all of that. If you have complications, generally we would like patients who have a problem after surgery to be getting in touch with us rather than their GP. I think that's good for us, it's good for the patient, and it's pretty good for the GP as well."

Vital to productivity and to the quality of the care, are the working environment and the clinical team. The core element of the elective hub at South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust is the mobile laminar flow operating theatre, provided by Vanguard Healthcare Solutions.

Tim has worked in similar theatres four times previously and described what it is like to operate in one: "Basically, it's pretty easy. I think the most obvious difference is that they're smaller than a modern, full size operating theatre. Although, I think in my time, I've probably worked in some full-size operating theatres which have had less space. The big ►



The inside of the Vanguard laminar flow theatre

Surgical hubs

difference for Vanguard is that they've been thought through. You've got an environment where everything has already been considered in terms of patient flows and the basic idea of having an anaesthetic room at one end, an operating theatre in the middle and a recovery area at the other end works very well."

The greater efficiency comes from having a degree of standardisation. Tim says, "It's not been the situation for each of my five times working in a Vanguard (theatre), but in this instance, we are doing arthroplasty work, full stop, and we've got a group of committed surgeons who have agreed from the outset what kit they're going to be using because immediately you start opening a theatre in a different part of the building, you're going to need to increase your number of kits, your operating trays and all the other paraphernalia that goes with it.

"The first thing is to actually be very focused on what are the particular procedures that we're going to do, and then to do them as a production line, in a positive way; a good production line that has good quality control."

Supporting the surgeons is a clinical team provided by Vanguard. Tim explains, "We've got a team of five all together and they're all clinically qualified and are all able to undertake at least two of the three sort of standard roles in theatre in terms of anaesthetics, operating, and circulating and recovery.

"They've been great. They're all very experienced and one of the great things we've had is that, because our theatre is now very close to our elective ward, there's been a huge amount of rapport building and acceptance. This isn't a case of a bolt on service which people are viewing from a distance, it's become very much part of our normal accepted practice."

That standardisation is part of what makes a surgical hub conducive to training. The Trust gained university status in 2022 and Glen explains, "That was based on the experience of doctors in training. We work with Warwick Medical School predominantly, but also train other disciplines of staff. So, one of the other considerations of the orthopaedic team has been the way that we've developed our therapy team.

"Within our South Warwickshire Accelerated Transfer Team (SWATT), those roles have been extended. We've got advanced clinical practitioners as part of the team, as well. So, the theory that we have, of making sure that every member of staff can reach their potential and work to the top of their license and to develop their skills, is why we developed the training centre and why we tried to create a bit of a magnet for recruitment.

"We've been very focused on both training and research. A lot of our clinicians, including



Tim Robertson, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust

our orthopaedic team, are really involved in delivering the next level of service and sharing that learning across the NHS. So, that in itself is an attraction to recruit future staff, but also training junior surgeons and ensuring that when they're with us that they're really busy and doing what they want to do as part of their training programme. Productivity is important as well."

Tim was asked whether the mobile theatre would contribute towards this at Warwick: "In this particular Vanguard, for our first month, we've had a very clear policy that we're trying very much to do consultant-driven surgery. I think it was a case of not trying to start doing too many things at once. I'm a full time NHS consultant and I'm a surgical trainer, so I have a training grade registrar with me. My expectation is that, now we've ironed out some of the early issues around logistics and everything else, there will be time to do some training. Again, it's a kind of protected space. Patients won't get cancelled because of trauma. We'll get the work done and I think the training is going to be very, very important."

The surgical hub's high productivity also leads to benefits such as shorter waiting lists, training opportunities, and reduced pressure on emergency services. Also, through Payment by Results (PBR), it generates the finances required

for the project to be undertaken. The additional capacity, in the form of the Vanguard theatre and the additional staff, is an investment. Activity based funding, South Warwickshire University NHS Foundation Trust's expertise in orthopaedics and their ability to offer a comprehensive service to neighbouring Trusts are all factors in the success of this venture.

Glen explains, "The return of Payment By Results has been an important element within our thinking on this, as has ensured that we get good productivity levels from the theatre. I pushed for the return to PBR because I think it's a great way to motivate clinicians and I think, as long as you can build into it the ability to invest in their services, then they're very willing to do that."

Asked about the key measures of success for the surgical hub, Glen answers: "Obviously, it's about reducing NHS waiting times - that's a national priority, and we are also ensuring that those around us, with longer waiting times, are accessing this.

"It's a great experience for patients, but it's working for the organisation as well. It's delivering some income, which is helping us with our cost improvement target. So, it's a win-win." **CSJ**



About the author

Chris Blackwell-Frost is CEO of Vanguard Healthcare Solutions, having joined on 1 January 2023. A pharmacist by training, Chris has more than 25 years' experience across the healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors in strategy, business development, proposition development, and marketing. He previously worked at Nuffield Health as Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Customer Officer, at Lloyds Pharmacy and AAH Pharmaceuticals. Chris is passionate about building on Vanguard's position as a trusted partner to the NHS, developing the company to help address key issues including the elective backlog, continuity of care during refurbishments, and supporting the New Hospital Programme with Vanguard's mobile and modular construction solutions.

SCAN ME



Scan here to watch the interviews with Glen, Harkamal and Tim.

Tel: +44 (0)1452 651850

Email: info@vanguardhealthcare.co.uk

Web: www.vanguardhealthcare.co.uk