

TSA special case study

HMP Wymott

Telecare in prisons

Overview

Across the UK, prison populations are ageing, and greater demands are being put on the health and care teams looking after frail prisoners. In Lancashire, HMP Wymott is tackling the problem head on by becoming the first UK prison to put telecare in cells, and the results are striking.

Like many 80-year-olds, Gordon* uses a walking frame to get about. But unlike most men in their eighties, the only journey he has to take is from his cell to the prison canteen and back again.

“It’s too big to use in here”, explains Gordon, pointing to his walking aid and then to the narrow cell where he spends most of his time. “But I can hardly walk on my own because of the ulcer in my leg. I’m frightened I might fall again.”

Six months ago, Gordon got up in the night to use the toilet. He felt dizzy, lost his balance and knocked himself out, losing all his front teeth. At 6am he was found on his cell floor. In A&E, doctors found a cancerous ulcer in his left leg which was removed. He stayed in hospital for weeks with one prison officer on bed-watch the whole time.

Help at the press of a button

“I feel safer now I have this,” Gordon says, holding up the pendant alarm around his neck. “I go to bed with it.” When he tripped over recently he was able to alert prison staff straight away by pressing the button. They responded within minutes, minimising the time Gordon was on the floor. ‘Long lie’ times increase health complications after a fall, with some studies showing that every hour on the floor equates to an extra day in hospital.

Gordon will probably spend the rest of his life at HMP Wymott. He is part of the prison’s growing ‘older’ population, with one third of its 1,176 inmates over 50. This is a higher proportion than most jails, although across the UK, all custodial populations are getting older. Research indicates that people age faster in prison, and this, combined with an increase in the successful prosecution of sex offenders for crimes they committed decades before, makes for a prison community with greater health needs.

The wing where Gordon lives is a specially adapted reablement facility that is home to 59 of HMP Wymott’s most vulnerable older prisoners. “These are guys who would be in a nursing

home on the outside”, says Mick Butler, custodial manager for safer living and residence at the prison. “We have some men in here who have difficulty getting out of bed without a hoist or getting off the toilet. Some of them have limbs missing, others have PTSD, we have quite a few with dementia and lung diseases like COPD.”

Best response to needs

HMP Wymott doesn’t have an inpatient facility and before telecare such as Gordon’s alarm were introduced, many of the older prisoners were, as Mick Butler describes, “on the fringes of needing 24-hour care and would ‘bed-block’ at the Royal Preston Hospital because there wasn’t anywhere suitable for them to be discharged to.”

Back in 2015, the enactment of the Care Act meant responsibility for prisoners’ social care needs passed to upper tier local authorities. As a result, Lancashire County Council had to take on this statutory role for the 4,000 prisoners in the five prisons across the county. Tony Pounder, director of adult services at the council explains more.

“There are a significant number of frail, older men in these prisons and we needed to look at how to best respond to their needs in a cost-effective way. Using assistive technology like this is a great example of how collaboration and creativity can help manage risks and support people’s social care needs.”

Previously at HMP Wymott, older inmates who were more prone to falls were checked periodically between 8pm – 8am by three carers at an annual cost of £174,676. During the day, prison staff and the healthcare team were responsible.

“The call on my staff is enormous”, says Barry Gilman, primary care manager at Bridgewater Community Healthcare, the NHS Trust responsible for the health of prisoners in the area. “There are a lot of operational issues to deal with, and we have lots of prisoners on medication which we need to provide. We are being constantly called out and interrupted. We often have to prioritise other things.”

Partnership approach

This drain on resources and staff time prompted custodial manager Mick Butler to join forces with Laura Hudson, a social worker at Lancashire Council to find a new solution. They called in Tunstall Healthcare and Progress Housing Group to explore whether the telecare service they provided to older people in the community could work in a custodial environment.

Installers looked at the practicalities of putting telecare in a prison. Sharp objects in a technician’s tool bag had to be accounted for, a ban on mobile devices meant the communication base unit needed to be locked up and an alert system had to be designed so the thick cell walls didn’t interfere with sensor signals.

With these barriers overcome, eleven older inmates – all judged to be at risk of falls, seizures, heart attacks and strokes - were provided with telecare. The total cost was £2,600 - a huge saving on the prison’s original care worker bill.

Shortly after the installation, an alert came through in the middle of the night, triggered by a prisoner’s bed mat. Sensors showed he had got up but not got back in. Duty staff responded quickly and found that the man, who is in his sixties and has dementia, had suffered a stroke. “We were able to get medical help quickly,” explains Mick Butler. “Telecare for us is an extra pair of eyes and ears. A quick response is often the difference between life and death – and it really was in this case.”

Due to the success of this telecare project at HMP Wymott – the first of its kind in the UK – Lancashire Council are planning to replicate it in three more prisons. For Mick Butler this will deliver some welcome relief. The specialist wing at HMP Wymott regularly receives requests to take prisoners from all across the region.

“It’s the whole package of care that we offer here. We have good staff who care and other prisoners who care. We are a big, busy prison. The churn is relentless. Although the prison population is reducing, the older prison population is rising, and they are queuing up to come here.”

*Gordon’s name has been changed

About TSA

TSA is the industry body for technology enabled care (TEC) services, representing organisations including telecare and telehealth service providers and suppliers, commissioners, digital health businesses, housing associations, emergency services, academics, charities and government bodies.

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