Fast track cancer diagnosis

Quick testing and diagnosis are what everyone wants if they suspect they may have cancer. For around two years the one stop breast cancer clinic at St Albans has offered test and diagnosis in one day and is now meeting the government’s target of seeing all patients with suspected breast cancer within two weeks of referral.

Patients are referred by their GPs, usually by fax. They are then sent an appointment letter to attend the clinic within two weeks and asked to fill in a simple questionnaire to give the consultant details of their medical history, their symptoms and any drugs they may be taking.

After an examination and discussion with a consultant, a decision is made on what tests need to be done. Specialist radiographers and nurses carry out mammograms, ultrasound and needle tests. The radiologist’s report may be enough to reach a diagnosis, often giving the patient the good news that tests have proved negative.

There are usually four to nine patients who need to be seen again in the afternoon. Their diagnosis is discussed at a multi-disciplinary meeting involving surgeons, pathologists, radiologists, oncologists, the breast care nurse and support staff. If the diagnosis is clear, the discussion is about the best treatment; where the tests are inconclusive it is to decide the way forward to achieve a firm diagnosis.

John Nicholls, the consultant who runs the clinic, which sees up to 24 patients a week, says the advantages are enormous for all women who are referred to it. ‘Fast track testing and diagnosis mean that, if tests are negative, the patient’s mind is put at rest immediately and she can go home with the worry lifted. Happily, eight out of ten women we see fall into that category.

‘For the women whose tests are indeterminate or positive, there is clearly a more difficult problem but getting test results quickly does eliminate the anxiety caused by uncertainty and means that treatment can begin at once’.

Getting the results quickly means these women also get immediate support from the clinic’s trained staff. Breast cancer nurse, Candice Wallis, always sits in with the patient when the news is bad. ‘We go to a private room afterwards and talk through what the consultant has said. I find out what support they have, who’s waiting for them and who will be at home when they get there.

‘Every patient is different and reacts in their own way: some want to sit and talk, to ask questions and discuss the situation; others just want to go straight home. We keep in touch throughout the treatment and I’m always at the end of a phone if anyone wants to ask questions’.

Candice finds that the one stop clinic makes it easier to keep track of patients’ details and to help them once a diagnosis has been made. It has also helped to keep the patient involved in all the decisions which need to be made about their treatment. This can include surgery, either a lumpectomy (removal of only the cancerous parts of the breast) or mastectomy (removal of the entire breast), radiotherapy, chemotherapy or drugs like Tamoxifen.

John Nicholls says he is optimistic about the outcome for almost all breast cancer patients: ‘It is rare to say there is nothing we can do. We tell them that for three to six months the cancer will dominate their lives, but one day they’ll wake up thinking that it isn’t too bad, they’ve had the treatment, are feeling well and have a life to live’.
Chief executive gets the needle

All front line staff are being offered flu vaccinations to help them stay fit and well to care for patients this winter.

As winter approaches and demand for hospital beds increases as the weather worsens, staff at all the Trust’s four hospitals are being encouraged to take as many precautions as possible with their own health.

The most recent member of staff to ‘get the needle’ is Trust chief executive, Stephen Eames, who is shown here receiving his flu injection from occupational health nurse, Rosemary Polan.

If you would like to be vaccinated against flu, get in touch with Occupational health and they will arrange it for you.

Bright future for St Albans

A new 18 bed ward is on the agenda for St Albans - and local MP, Kerry Pollard, was delighted to see the plans when he visited the hospital in November.

The new ward will be housed on level 4 of the Moynihan Building. This is currently occupied by administration staff who will be found new homes to free up space for more surgical beds.

The redevelopment, which is costing around £300,000, should be complete early in 2001, creating facilities for extra orthopaedic patients from Monday to Friday and allowing the hospital’s operating theatres to be used to full capacity.

Kerry Pollard said; ‘I am very pleased about the ambitious expansion plans for the hospital. The extra surgical beds will certainly help to get waiting lists down more quickly.’

He added that he had met a nurse practitioner and was impressed with the nurse-led diagnostic centre and state-of-the-art radiography unit at St Albans, ‘It has a bright future’, he concluded.

New nurses for A&E

A successful recruitment day for A&E nurses in November has increased staff by four new nurses.

The event attracted nursing students, paramedics, staff from other parts of the Trust and other health professionals.

At the end of the evening, 17 people had taken away recruitment packs and a further 20, who were unable to attend, contacted HR for more details afterwards. A number of qualified staff signed up to join the Trust’s nursing bank which will help reduce the use of agency nurses.

An unexpected visitor was a former patient who took the opportunity to drop in and thank staff for the treatment they had given him.
Iron in your blood?
Test results for iron levels in the blood can now be through in three days instead of three weeks, thanks to a new test carried out at Hemel. The Pathology lab can now carry out its own transferrin tests instead of sending them to an outside lab. Transferrin is a protein in the blood which binds to iron and helps move it around the body. The test is particularly useful for assessing iron status in patients with inflammatory conditions like arthritis or liver disease where the standard test for iron status, ferritin, can give misleading results.

Keeping an eye on vision aid
Have you had an eye test lately? Found some funky new frames and cast aside your old glasses? If so, you could put your specs to good use in helping to improve someone else’s sight. People with sight problems are already benefiting from the recycling scheme for spectacles run by Patient Affairs. Unclaimed glasses from lost property or which have been donated by patients’ relatives are sent to Vision Aid Overseas. The charity grades the glasses and finds new owners for them abroad. So, don’t leave those old glasses in the drawer - send them where they’ll do some good.

New radio stars?
Young people from sixth forms in West Herts and North London were invited to an open evening at the Cancer Centre at Mount Vernon to find out more about a career in radiography. It is planned to make the open evening an annual event. The visit was arranged as part of a national initiative to attract more people into the job. Of the five people who attended the open evening, one had already decided to train as a radiographer, a second became seriously interested and two were planning careers in general medicine and wanted an insight into radiography.

On the Pulse

Hip Hip Hurray

Six new beds for patients having emergency hip operations opened at Hemel Hospital on 1 December, with six more to follow in January. Patients over 65 who are admitted with a broken hip will now move swiftly from A&E to Lancaster ward where they will get specialist care from a team of specially trained nurses. The ward will provide orthopaedic, medical and social care, both before and after operations. It will also help patients regain their independence following surgery, with orthopaedic and care of the elderly consultants working closely together to make sure patients get regular medical reviews.

It was them!
A lucky win left eleven nurses on Croxley Ward more than £12,000 richer when their Lottery numbers came up trumps. And it was even luckier for syndicate organiser, Jerry Johnson, who had decided it would be the last week he’d play the Lottery as he was moving to Northampton. Sister Sandy Vigor was on holiday in Wales when she got a phone call to say she’d won. She remembers ‘I thought it was a wind-up! Then I realised that they’d had to contact my son to find out where I was and it seemed an awful lot of trouble to go to just for a practical joke’.
On her return, Sandy found that, with their five numbers and the bonus ball, the syndicate had scooped £136,400 between them. ‘It was such a boost for Croxley Ward,’ Sandy says, ‘We had all been working really hard for a really long time and the win lifted everyone’s spirits. We were all so excited but I don’t think anyone truly believed it until they were holding the cheque in their hands!’
The money is going to a variety of ‘good causes’ - to buy cars, pay off debts, invest in ISAs and on well-deserved exotic holidays. Sandy has booked a train safari in Africa - ‘It was something I could only dream of before the Lottery win, I kept looking at the brochure and thinking if only’. Next year the dream becomes reality.

Goodbye Jan
Mount Vernon has sadly said goodbye to one of its longest serving members of staff. After a lifetime of service (28 years), Jan Grigson-Marshall has left Mount Vernon. She was a senior nurse in A&E before becoming a nurse practitioner at the Minor Injuries Unit in 1996.
Sister Sue Harrison says Jan will be missed by all her colleagues. ‘She is a genuinely caring person and we all enjoyed working with her. Jan will be impossible to replace and we will miss her a great deal’.

4
Saracens’ new ward

Saracens, Watford’s famous Rugby team, scrummied down to Watford General in October to open the new ward which has been named after them. The new 24 bed modular building, which was built on the Watford site in just eight weeks, opened in November to house patients from the Princess Michael of Kent wing during the refurbishment of level five.

Now that work is complete, Saracens Ward will be used to help get more patients well and home quickly during the busy winter period and may, in future, be used as a discharge lounge to free up beds on other wards occupied by patients waiting to go home that day.

Speeding up test results

A new pathology lab is set to speed up essential hospital tests. The new lab will have greater capacity and an upgraded computer system to give doctors quicker access to results and speed through the huge volume of blood, body tissue and urine tests which grows every year.

Clinical Director of Pathology, Liz Gaminara, says that the new technology is a real step forward, ‘Doctors will be able to call up test results on a computer screen instantly from any hospital within the Trust without having to wait for pieces of paper to come from the lab. They will be able to see at a glance which tests have been already been performed, cutting down on the number of repeat test’.

The Trust is hoping to build the new lab by 2004 at Hemel Hempstead, upgrading and refurbishing smaller labs at Watford and Mount Vernon. Private partners will be sought to build and fund the project through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

Services will be centralised at the new lab, allowing staff to specialise and build their expertise and experience in areas such as cancer diagnosis. It will also make for a quicker turnround of routine tests, increasing the number of batches from twice a week to once a day. Extended working hours are also planned, increasing to seven days a week in some areas, with a longer working day in others.

Closer links with Community

A study day in November brought together the Trust’s care of the elderly team and community nurses. Nurses from local nursing and residential homes came to Watford to gain an insight into how elderly patients are cared for in the hospital.

The study day included a tour of wards, meeting hospital nursing staff and attending talks by Dr Wendy Sommerville, Clinical director for Care of the Elderly, and other members of the team. These covered topics which included heart attacks, nutrition and a multi-disciplinary approach to care, bring together everyone involved, from social workers to consultants.

Since the study day, one staff nurse has been recruited to join the Trust and three others have enquired about the possibility of working here.

The sweet smell of NVQ success

More than a third more health care assistants in the Trust collected National Vocation Qualifications than at the same time last year. Some 40 assistants studied courses at all levels covering a range of disciplines, from acute care to outpatients.

Increasingly, staff are choosing to study for NVQs and it’s expected that the number of awards will rise by half again, with up to 60 staff collecting awards at levels two and three.

‘These NVQ awards show the motivation and commitment of our staff’, says Gillian Hooper, Director of Nursing. ‘It isn’t easy to study to improve your skills while working in a demanding job. These achievements show the contribution health care assistants make to the hospital team and their potential to contribute to higher standards of care in nursing and midwifery’.

Picture shows Ann Brooks from Outpatients at St Albans, receiving her NVQ certificate from Trust Chairwoman, Rosie Sanderson.
Three decades at Mount Vernon

Sally Matthews has worked at Mount Vernon for 31 years, since beginning her training. For the last 17 years she has worked in the Cancer Centre and now leaves for a well-deserved retirement. Margaret Sullivan, business manager of the Centre, says ‘Sally is a well respected and highly valued member of our staff’ we want to thank her for her dedicated contribution to the department and wish her a long and happy retirement.

New agreement to involve staff

After four months of negotiation and meetings between management and trade union reps, the Trust’s new Trade Union Recognition and Facilities Agreement was finalised in September. It is now being signed off by trade union full time officials. The agreement has four core principles:

- The Trust recognises trade unions and professional organisations and the agreement covers the majority of functional groups in the Trust
- The agreement provides rights to trades union representatives for time off with agreement and access to facilities to help them provide a good service to their members and with management
- It provides a framework to encourage a positive and constructive working relationship between employees and management and to recognise the Trust’s desire to have staff involved in the services and running of the Trust
- It provides a formal mechanism to encourage consultation and negotiation on the terms, conditions and working environment of employees

The development of the agreement involved regional and union local representatives, along with Trust management under the auspices of the Joint Consultation Committee.

Watford General takes new heart

Two new consultant cardiologists have been appointed to work at Watford General Hospital. Michael van der Watt and Will Wallis will start work at the hospital in the new year.

Chief Executive, Stephen Eames, says he is delighted with the new appointments and warmly welcomes the new consultants. ‘We had a very strong shortlist and there was no difficulty in selecting two outstanding candidates to work with us.

These appointments signal real improvements in the standard of the cardiology service we provide to our patients in Watford and I am confident that we will make great strides forward with two new consultants on board’.

Michael, who trained in South Africa, is currently working as a senior registrar in cardiology at the Hammersmith Hospital; he is already familiar with the area, having worked at Hemel Hempstead Hospital two years ago. He is a keen fly fisherman and is also interested in computers and restoring antique furniture.

Will currently works as a specialist registrar at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, he has also worked at the Royal Free Hospital and has held several posts at St Thomas’s Hospital. He is interested in all aspects of aviation and flies light aircraft and microlights.

Oh, what a relief

It’s thought that one in ten people in the UK suffer chronic pain - that’s a lot of people whose lives are affected every day. There’s good news for these people as our services are expanding to help those whose lives are affected by pain which hasn’t responded to conventional treatments. The Chronic Pain Management service has recently been re-organised to allow more patients to be treated.

Now there are clinics once a week at all four of our hospitals, with extra sessions available at Watford. A clinical nurse specialist, Kelly Barnes, has just joined us. She will take a major role in educating ward staff about chronic pain, helping to identify patients and the relevant treatments for them.

Dr Paul Hart, who leads the service, explains: ‘We can help people find a way back to leading a normal life. The people who come to see us may have had pain for years, have often been seen by a string of doctors, tried various treatments, even had operations, but still experience frequent pain.

‘We may well be able to help, not necessarily by finding a cure for the condition which is causing the pain - and for many patients there is no clear diagnosis - but by helping them manage their pain. Treatments might include injections, physiotherapy and psychological techniques to improve quality of life. Many of our patients report that their pain has been reduced’.

The service has now applied for funding for a clinical psychologist to join the team and is aiming to build a multi-disciplinary approach, in which specialists, including physiotherapists and occupational therapists, come together to treat patients in all clinics.

Copy for the next issue - marked On the Pulse - should be sent to The Communications Department at Watford General Hospital
Green light for scanner centre

Plans for a new £1.6 million scanner centre at Hemel have been backed to the tune of £1.2 million by the NHS Executive’s Eastern Regional Office, leaving the Trust to pay just £400,000.

The new centre will be in the fracture clinic, next to radiology services, including X-ray, at Hemel, providing a complete service on the site. A new home will be found for the fracture clinic.

The Trust’s first MRI scanner, which will take up residence as soon as the conversion is complete, has been paid for through the National Lottery New Opportunities Fund with a grant of £900,000.

Patients from Hemel and St Albans now have to travel to Luton if they need an MRI scan. The scanner is a diagnostic tool which allows checks on internal organs, including the heart and brain, it can be used to check for diseases including cancer and to establish damage caused by a stroke. Cancer patients will still go to the Cancer Centre at Mount Vernon.

The new centre will also house the Trust’s new CT scanner, which has also been paid for by the New Opportunities Fund. In the ten years since the first one was installed at Hemel, volunteers have raised £450,000 for its running costs.

Day surgery jazzes it up

Watford’s new day surgery unit is celebrating its opening with jazz for all comers at a special open evening from 6.30pm on 12 January. The well-known John Ethridge jazz quartet will be in attendance to help make the evening go with a swing.

The 16 bed, three theatre, day surgery unit has been up and running since August but this is the first opportunity its busy manager, Rachel Fysh, has had to throw open its doors to show it off and say thank you to staff.

Rachel says: ‘The unit’s staff have been great and have worked so hard during the last few months, I just want to thank them - and a jazz evening seems like a good way of doing that. We also want to show off the unit to staff from right across the Trust, so anyone who would like to come along is very welcome - particularly as we need more staff!’

The day surgery unit carries out a variety of procedures from varicose veins and hernias, to oral surgery. It currently has 20 nursing and seven clerical staff, many of whom work part time.

Old timers

A new long service award is about to be created for those people who have worked in West Hertfordshire hospitals, including Mount Vernon, for ten years or more. The awards will be presented to staff for long service and are to celebrate their commitment and dedication to the NHS. Ceremonies will take place in January and February 2001.