The development and evaluation of a virtual visiting programme facilitating regular friends and family contact for hospital inpatients during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated significant restrictions on physical visits to hospitals to reduce infection risks. Consequently, patients are separated from loved ones at times of extreme stress and ill health. To reduce this burden, we have developed a structured service of virtual visits, where patients can see and communicate with loved ones using secure video calling applications on trust electronic devices.

Methods Trust devices (iPads and iPhones) are utilised by ward staff to facilitate virtual visits. Timing of such visits are usually pre-arranged with family members and patients after appropriate consent is gained. An instruction sheet was available to assist facilitators.

Quantitative and qualitative feedback was obtained focusing on the experiences of staff members who facilitated the visits, as well as some of the people ‘visiting’ during these calls.

Results 46 responses were received from staff facilitators, and from 11 virtual visitors. Unanimously (n=46), staff indicated that virtual visiting helped them deliver good patient care and they would facilitate again. There was agreement that it added value for patients and staff (n=46). Feedback from relatives reflected they found it very positive and it allowed them to know much better what was going on with their loved ones (n=11).

The most common challenges included poor internet connections (40%), lack of training resources (35%), and lack of privacy in bays (9%).

Conclusions Data shows that structured virtual visiting has been beneficial for patients & loved ones during COVID. To address challenges, there is scope for more training provision and addressing connectivity issues. Overall, this is something that would be valuable to continue as good practice, during the Covid-19 pandemic and afterwards.