

Reducing Absence Without Leave (AWOL) from Adult Psychiatric Wards

Start and end dates of work covered by case study

April 2014 - present

Project Aim

To reduce failure to return to acute psychiatric wards by detained and informal patients by 50%

Headline quote

"Through their understanding and passion for patient care and safety, and their drive and support for our teams, they (Oxford Health Safer Care team and Oxford AHSN Patient Safety Theme) have enabled the wards to achieve excellent success in implementing, maintaining and sustaining of the safe return of mental health patients from leave using quality improvement methodology".

Nokuthula Ndimande, Matron, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust.

Lead AHSN and joint partners

Oxford Health NHS FT is the lead organisation in collaboration with the Oxford AHSN Patient Safety Theme. The Lead Matron is Nokuthula Ndimande based at the Warneford Hospital, Oxford. Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust is now participating in the project and Central and Northwest London NHS Foundation Trust plan to initiate the project. The South of England Mental Health Patient Safety Collaborative has worked with all trusts in the region to provide learning in Institute for Health Improvement (IHI) methodology.

Key points at a glance

- Oxford AHSN Patient Safety Theme has worked with Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust and the South of England Mental Health Patient Safety Collaborative to reduce failure to return to acute psychiatric wards by 50% using IHI methodology.
- Five of seven participating Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust wards have achieved and sustained this 50% reduction. The remaining two continue to work towards this target.
- Project Teams from Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust participated in an Oxford AHSN Patient Safety Theme quality improvement training programme with NHSIQ. These teams are now positioned to employ improvement methodology to reduce failure to return to wards in their organisations.
- Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust has commenced the project on Bluebell Ward, Prospect Park, and return on time rates are now at 91% from a baseline of 20%. The ward is now working towards sustainability. Adoption plans will then commence. Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust has also agreed to participate in the project commencing in Milton Keynes.

Background Summary

Absconding is a significant safety issue that can have negative consequences for patients, their relatives, and staff. Absconding includes both leaving the ward without permission and failure to return at an agreed time. Between 2003 and 2013, 22% of inpatient suicides in England occurred following an incident of absconding from mental health wards. Patients are also at greater risk of self-harm, self-neglect, missed medication, and interruptions to treatment plans. Absconding incidents can also cause relatives and staff distress and anxiety can lead to a deterioration in the relationship between staff and patients' relatives and distract nurses from other responsibilities. In many cases the police are also engaged in the search for the missing patient which has a considerable impact on police resources. This project aimed to improve the safe return of both detained and informal patients who took leave or time away from acute psychiatric wards.

The focus of the project was to improve the number of detained and informal patients who return on time to the ward following leave or time away. The measure definition was agreed with Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust and is now embedded in local policy. Late return is defined as:

“any inpatient, detained or informal, who fails to return to the ward later than ten minutes over the leave period that was agreed and documented by ward staff, and has not made contact with the ward to agree a later return time”.

Challenge identified and actions taken

In the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, leave episodes can number over 1000 episodes per week across the acute psychiatric wards. The high number of leave periods and the need to enhance the reliability of patients returning safe and well, and on time, to the ward indicated that new approaches to managing leave were required. Ward staff worked with patients to agree changes, and together with the coaches, they developed four tests of change using Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles including:

- *PDSA cycle 1: establishment of a signing-in-and-out book*
- *PDSA cycle 2: ward phone card*
- *PDSA cycle 3: patient information leaflets*
- *PDSA cycle 4: introduction of a pre-leave form*

The Oxford AHSN Patient Safety Theme worked with the Oxford Health Safer Care Team to train and coach staff in improvement methodology to improve the reliability of care processes surrounding the management of leave. It also:

- worked with the South of England Mental Health Collaborative
- worked alongside the provider and coached clinical staff to implement the project using IHI methodology
- supported teams with the development of measures, data collection and the analysis of data

- develop a regional adoption plan (ongoing)

Outcomes

On the lead ward, baseline data was collected over 17 weeks and the mean rate for patients returning on time was 56.0% of the total number of patients returning to the ward. This increased to 87.1% at 45 weeks following intervention using improvement methodology. This corresponds to a 55.5% increase. The ward has since sustained a mean of 91% patients returning on time. This is in the context of the ward managing a mean of 165 leave episodes during the baseline period and this increased to a mean of 346 leave episodes following the introduction of the national NHS smoking ban in April 2015.

The project has now started the adoption plan and a further four wards have achieved mean return on time rates above 85% in Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust has also achieved a mean 91% return on time on their lead ward and is working towards sustainability.

Plans for the future

Once sustained, the plan is to develop the adoption plan across the remaining Berkshire Healthcare acute wards. Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust have also agreed to participate in the project.

Contact for further information

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AHSN Core Objectives

- A – Promote health equality and best practice**
- B – Speed up adoption of innovation into practice to improve clinical outcomes**
- C – Build a culture of partnership and collaboration**

Clinical priority or enabling theme/s

- 1 - Reducing premature mortality**
- 4 – Positive experience of treatment and care**
- 5 – Treating people in a safe environment and protecting them from avoidable harm**