

Stracathro Hospital: a new future for a rural hospital

Michael H Lyall, *Medical Director, NHS Tayside*

In 1998, governance issues were raised regarding the provision of general surgery in Stracathro Hospital in Angus, a rural hospital serving a population of about 110,230 people.¹ This resulted in the complete removal, almost overnight, of emergency general surgery from this hospital to Ninewells Hospital, a major teaching hospital some 30 miles away. This led to considerable uncertainty over the future of Stracathro Hospital which, in turn, led to concerns that this was the beginning of 'death by a thousand cuts' leading to closure of the hospital. Confidence in the NHS in Angus was at an all time low, staff were disillusioned, and there was immense public anxiety with the formation of public action groups to 'save Stracathro Hospital'. Clinicians in Dundee then raised a number of issues relating to patient safety in acute general medicine in Stracathro Hospital, further fuelling what was seen as in keeping with a centralist agenda by the Health Board. These concerns were compounded by the publication of the Tayside Acute Services Review in 2001, which recommended a new hospital in Angus.

NHS Tayside then commissioned an independent external review of acute medicine in Stracathro Hospital by the Royal Colleges. The President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the Vice-President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh carried this out in 2001.² They found a committed and dedicated staff and a public desperate to maintain a viable hospital in Stracathro. Although it was not possible to sustain acute emergency medicine, it was accepted that there was scope for innovative use of the excellent surgical and other facilities. The removal of acute medicine and closure of the coronary care unit, with transfer to Ninewells Hospital in Dundee, led to a novel approach to thrombolysis in the community with the development of paramedic-led thrombolysis. This has proved to be a valuable and sustainable model of care.³

A change in leadership in NHS Tayside led to a determination to listen to the staff and the public who were keen to develop Stracathro Hospital. Plans to build a new hospital were shelved and a commitment given to modernise the services provided on the site. This involved NHS Tayside management working with the public, the local action groups, the local authority and the Local Health Care Cooperative to develop an integrated model of care, which would deliver 80% of acute care locally. In the local newspaper *Health News* in spring 2002, available to staff and the public, Gerry Marr, the new Chief Executive of Tayside University Hospitals Trust said "What we are trying to do in Angus is something from which the whole of Scotland can learn. The big challenge we faced was providing the vast majority of acute health services to a rural population, close to where people live, at a time when changes in medical technology and tough new professional standards meant there was very strong pressure on the NHS to centralise acute services. I don't mean, however, that modernisation has to mean centralisation."

The model of care was developed as part of the Angus Integrated Health Services Project led jointly between primary and secondary care and the local authority, which planned to provide integrated services across the whole of Angus:

- An Ambulatory Diagnostic and Treatment Centre in Stracathro Hospital
- Elderly assessment and rehabilitation
- Stroke rehabilitation
- Cardiac rehabilitation
- Intermediate Care
- Palliative Care
- Rapid Response community thrombolysis
- Minor injuries units within community hospitals.

A major capital investment of £10 million led to the development of the ambulatory diagnostic and treatment centre (ADTC) in Stracathro Hospital which now provides modern services including:

- A wide range of out-patient clinics, many of which are 'one-stop' clinics and nurse-led services
- A dermatology treatment centre

- Rapid access diagnostic care including ultrasound, CT and MRI scanning, gastroscopy, flexible sigmoidoscopy and colonoscopy
- Day case and ambulatory planned surgery, with overnight stay facilities until Saturday morning. All patients are seen prior to surgery at a nurse-led pre-assessment clinic. A wide range of surgical procedures is carried out, all of which have been risk-assessed and agreed as suitable for management within an ambulatory setting. Opportunities are taken to increase the range of procedures carried out, the most recent being the development of minimal access knee surgery.

This development provides a clinically safe and effective service, which has allowed us to use Stracathro Hospital as a vital community resource. The aim has been to repatriate as much diagnostic and treatment services as possible from Dundee to Angus. It is anticipated that activity will reach 45,000 episodes of care this year.

The staff and the public in Angus now see a future for the health services in Angus. The patient action groups have disbanded and reformed themselves as the 'Friends of Stracathro Hospital'. Waiting times for day surgery, out-patient appointments, MRI and CT scanning are all reduced, as are patients who fail to attend for appointments. The reduction in waiting times has seen patients travelling from Dundee and North Fife to Stracathro Hospital for surgery. Much work has still to be done to continuously improve the service. However, thanks to the hard work and dedication of the staff, and the support of the Angus communities there is now a sense of optimism within the community and pride in their Hospital.

References

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