

Media Release

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BEST KEPT SECRET IN NHS SCOTLAND CROWN IS WINNING GLOBAL ATTENTION IN TREATING MOST CHALLENGING PATIENTS IN THE WORLD

Psychiatrists and legal experts are travelling thousands of miles to learn from clinicians in a Scots Hospital how they are achieving unrivaled success in treating the most challenging patients in the world.

The surprise jewel in Scotland's NHS crown that is attracting so much international attention is The State Hospital at Carstairs in Lanarkshire.

New approaches developed by healthcare professionals there have resulted in a growing reputation as a world leader in the challenging field of forensic mental health – in particular extreme paranoid schizophrenia.

And now experts from Pakistan have asked for help to emulate the Scottish system into their country.

It's probably the best kept secret of success in NHS Scotland ... for it seems that international recognition is widespread while few in our own country know anything about the remarkable results being achieved by NHS staff right on our own doorstep!

The ground-breaking revolution in innovative care for State Hospital patients began with the demolition of the buildings that were built in the late 1930s. The old "Carstairs" resembled an austere prisoner of war camp. In 2012 a brand-new purpose-built NHS hospital complete with high tech (but discreet) security systems and the latest in rehabilitation features was opened. Additional legislation was introduced further merging law and mental health into Scots Law, ensuring patients could be more appropriately dealt with by the NHS instead of solely by the courts and prison system.

The final key was to unlock new found success by giving clinical teams at Carstairs the freedom to develop new techniques and approaches to treating their patients.

There are currently just over 110 men receiving treatment in the hospital and most have lived terrible lives of abuse and neglect themselves before ending up there. In the past, the focus has always been on intensive one-to-one sessions with specialist forensic psychiatrists and other intensive treatment techniques.

Now the various healthcare professions - led by psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, catering, facilities, support and security staff – are using specialist group sessions with small groups of patients to deliver new ways of rehabilitation and treatment.

The key is to use “less medicine” and more compassion and understanding ... and it is bringing remarkable success when delivered in partnership through team shared sessions where everyone has an influence and a “voice”.

Violence and aggression levels have been dramatically reduced in recent years and more patients than ever are gaining confidence and skills, and the ability to move forward through treatment programmes that can see them move out of the high security environment that The State Hospital provides, to lower security specialist centres and a more meaningful life.

“Realistic Medicine” is the name of the new approach – it essentially recognises that in many cases the NHS has invested in “too much medicine” and that a new approach involving less medicine and more structured care and partnership respect with patients, staff, carers and volunteers can deliver better results for everyone.

At Carstairs, Forensic Consultant Psychiatrist, Dr Gordon Skilling leads the Realistic Medicine programme and his colleague Dr Khuram Khan, Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist is leading the international education process that has attracted huge interest from peers in Pakistan and elsewhere around the world.

Dr Skilling: “The last couple of years has seen the most remarkable changes in successful outcomes.

“Our most important resource is our staff and how we work together for patients and their families. Our approach is much more about recognising the challenges to patients and to staff, and to the development of care and understanding. First and foremost, our staff volunteer to take part in Realistic Medicine group sessions with patients, and get to know them in a way that no-one else has previously.

“These patients – yes some have done dreadful things - but so many of them have lived such awful lives of neglect and abuse, and it’s very unlikely that anyone has worked with them to give them confidence or show care and respect.

“It’s about empowering these groups to be innovative, creative and practical. Changes that really matter and where taking part is a huge aspect of the process of success – bringing everyone together as a team with equal opportunity to make a real difference. Many small changes bringing about a notable transformation in approach and treatment and care and respect and experience.

“Facilitating improved menus, access to gym equipment, quality improvement across the entire hospital regime – getting involved in plastic free canteens delivered opportunity and responsibility out with health but hugely rewarding for everyone involved to achieve – patients themselves entrusted and participating in areas that are not directly to do with treatment but have direct spin-off effects from being involved in decisions and influencing change. Creating new collaborations between staff groups, and between staff and patients. The enthusiasm spread with fantastic levels of participation.”

Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist, Dr Khuram Khan leads Project Pakistan under a Global Citizen programme designed to support Scotland’s international reputation and role in the world as an exporter of humanitarian knowledge and expertise.

He and colleagues are working very closely with peers in Pakistan to usher in an education programme.

Dr Khan explains: “We have strong partnerships and co-ordinated working between mental health and law and linked training; unified approaches to patient needs and true co-operation.

“Here in Scotland law and psychiatry are on the same page with the School of Forensic Mental Health right at the centre of things.

“Through international seminars and networks Pakistan learned of Scotland’s pioneering approaches and requested support to achieve what is being delivered here.”

Over the past 18 months Dr Khan and others have delivered webinars, training sessions and facilitated visits ... and already things are starting to change.

“Last year Pakistan changed law to end capital punishment for blasphemy ... a common reason for psychiatric patients to be arrested, convicted and locked up. Now the next steps are being taken to develop the system to give those same patients the proper care rather than being treated as criminals,” he added.

Dr Jana de Villiers, Consultant Psychiatrist for The State Hospital's Intellectual Disability Service.

State Hospital Chief Executive, Gary Jenkins saw his clinical team win the 2020 Psychiatric Team of the Year Award for Quality Improvement within two years of being appointed. Having previously managed clinical services at the West of Scotland Beatson Cancer Centre and the Regional Institute of Neurosciences in Glasgow, Gary and his senior leadership team and Board say they are on-course to continue with further improvements to deliver even more success outcomes for this most challenging group of patients in the months and years ahead.

One of their aims is to transform the reputation of The State Hospital here at home in Scotland, where so many people still perceive the hospital as a penal institution and not as a pioneering world leader in delivering effective mental health treatment and rehabilitation.

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Notes for Editors:

1. Link to videos:
 - The State Hospital (Carstairs) - A World Success Story Deserving to be told in Scotland: <https://youtu.be/vbKWD72j0U0>
 - The secret of success at Scotland's State Hospital: Realistic Medicine - Dr Gordon Skilling, Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist: <https://youtu.be/mAHcwugFAz0>
 - The world looks to Scotland's State Hospital to learn – Dr Khuram Khan, Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist: <https://youtu.be/pndzie1SbfE>
 - Treatment technique reaches patients with an intellectual disability never before reached – Dr Jana de Villiers, Consultant Psychiatrist: <https://youtu.be/xs5oSyynhPQ>
2. For further information, videos and audio recordings relating to The State Hospital, please visit The State Hospital's website: www.tsh.scot.nhs.uk

Media Contact:

Caroline McCarron, Head of Communications, The State Hospital (telephone 01555 842016 / email caroline.mccarron@nhs.scot).