



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Digital Transformation in the Health and Care Professions (BMHP6026)

Component 1: Written Report

Student name: Vannia Celia Delfino

Student number: 2322920

Lecturer's name: Muhammed Khan

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Introduction

For decades, the image of 'acute care' in UK has been synonymous with the hospital ward. Along with its fluorescent light, the smell of antiseptic and constant beeping of medical machinery. Yet today, within its very fabric, the National Health Service is undergoing a change that is both quiet and profound. As our population ages and physical beds reach a historic breaking point, let us not consider Virtual Ward simply as a technical solution to a logistics problem but rather as an embodiment of how more caring and person-centred treatment can be delivered to the vulnerable (NHS England, 2024).

A virtual ward is all about taking the hospital to the patient instead of taking the patient to the hospital; it is a complex mix of medical treatment, multidisciplinary support, and even better – the warmth of home. With tools like CPAP machines now being used by NHS High Acuity Care doesn't always mean four walls of a hospital anymore. This report will help us understand how this model has evolved, what technology enables it, and whose stories are often hidden behind data on dedicated staff providing care or families receiving it.

Historical Development and Current State

A Shift in Perspective The dream of "Hospital at Home" is not a modern invention; visionaries in the 1960s were already arguing that people heal better, faster, and more completely in familiar surroundings. However, for decades, this remained a niche concept often limited by technology at that time until finally extreme systemic pressures brought about by COVID-19 turned this vision into national standard care during heights of pandemic when clinicians learned respiratory patients could be safely monitored from afar using simple tools like pulse oximeters and daily check-ins.

In April 2022, NHS formally launched its national programme with an ambitious goal for every 100,000 people to have 40-50 'virtual beds' available in communities (The Health Foundation). This was not just about software; it was about changing culture within NHS itself. By late 2024 this capacity had grown over 12 thousand beds across England (NHS England). As Lord Darzi Independent Review recently emphasised; NHS must shift from 'analogue to digital' as well as from 'hospital to community' if they wish to survive this decade! Currently virtual wards are offered at every Integrated Care Board (ICB) ranging from heart failure all way through frailty (NHS England).

Innovation and Technology

Bringing the ICU to the Bedside with CPAP The true "hero" of the respiratory virtual ward is the Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machine.

For a patient with respiratory failure, this machine has been called a lifesaver by delivering a continuous flow of pressurised air through a mask to keep the airways patent and the oxygen saturations stable. If the patient needed CPAP, it was previously mandated that they must be in an HDU or ICU.

Now, with miniaturised hardware and the IoT, these machines are small enough to sit on a bedside table next to a cup of tea. The human cost of this leap in technology is mind-boggling. Robinson (2021) published a piece on PubMed that showed 65% of patients with respiratory failure avoided the trauma and complications of invasive mechanical ventilation when ward-based and home-based CPAP was used appropriately. Modern CPAP machines are smart machines; they use cellular data to send real-time information about patient respiratory rate, pressure, and mask fit directly into a clinical dashboard monitored by experts (NICE, 2023).

If the patient's SpO2 drops at 02:00 hours, an automated alert is sent out. A clinician in a centralised hub can then check the data, speak to the patient via video link or send out a community nurse. It is described as providing digital safety netting to allow one to sleep at home in one's own bed surrounded by one's own belongings whilst being kept under close observation by world-class experts (NICE, 2023). It transforms one's home into a clinical environment without removing its domesticity.

Impact on Workforce

Impact on work force For NHS workforce's virtual wards, it represents an epistemic shift in professional identity. For most nurses and doctors, "work" has historically meant being physically present at the bedside; now they are becoming "tele-clinicians." This transition also brings substantial advantages: nurses who may be physically exhausted from decades spent on their feet doing 12-hour shifts over hard hospital floors can now monitor patients remotely using their vast clinical intuition through screens (RCN, 2024).

The efficiency gains are beyond dispute: when underpinned by strong digital support, one nurse can safely look after almost twice as many patients—up to 19—as in a traditional ward setting (Health Innovation Network, 2024). This is crucial for an NHS

that is already short of over 40,000 nurses. The emotional challenges must be acknowledged, however; many staff experience "clinical hesitation," an instinctive fear that digital sensors cannot detect soft signs of illness—the slight change in skin tone or fear in someone's eyes or even just confusion in their voice (Journal of Medical Internet Research, 2025). Humanising the virtual ward for workforce means ensuring they are not just looking at data points but have time and space to keep that all-important human connection with their patients (RCN, 2024).

Impact on service delivery

From a management point of view, virtual wards are like a pressure valve for a system under siege. In the UK, "bed blocking," where patients are medically fit for discharge but have nowhere to go, is a major cause of A&E delays. Virtual wards break this cycle. By allowing patients to move into a "virtual bed" earlier, hospital flow improves. In the South East of England alone, virtual wards saved 9,000 physical bed days in just one year.

This enabled those beds to be used for emergency surgeries and critical trauma cases (NHS England, 2024). The economic reality makes sense too. Research in BMJ Open (2024) shows that virtual care is more than an inexpensive alternative; it is a sustainable model that reduces the total cost of an acute episode by almost £2,000 per patient (NICE, 2023b). By using the infrastructure at home—the patient's own electricity, food, and bed—the NHS could divert millions toward front-line staff and life-saving technologies. This is service delivery reimagined: efficient, cost-effective, and deeply rooted in the community.

Impact on patients

Statistics and economic models often miss the most vital part of the story: the patient's soul. Organisations like Macmillan Cancer Support (2023) have long argued that for patients with chronic or complex needs, the hospital environment itself can be a source of trauma. The loss of autonomy, lack of sleep, and isolation from family can lead to "hospital delirium" and depression. Being "admitted" to a virtual ward restores dignity. Patients feel more "in control" of their lives; they can wear their own clothes eat food they enjoy and have pets by their side. This leads to high satisfaction levels often exceeding 85% (The Access Group 2024). Clinically speaking benefits at home are just as clear: those in virtual wards are eight times less likely to experience functional decline—the loss of muscle strength and independence when an elderly person is bedbound in a hospital for too long (Health Innovation Network 2024). For a respiratory patient on CPAP ward noise absence will usually result in better adherence to therapy and faster overall recovery.

Impact on community

The virtual ward does not exist in a vacuum; it sits at the heart of the community. It forces a more integrated way of working where GPs district nurses and social workers collaborate more closely with hospital specialists (NHS England 2023). This whole-system approach is exactly what the NHS Long Term Plan envisioned. However, this transition places a new and significant burden on unpaid carers. When a patient is on a virtual ward their spouse partner or child often becomes the de facto nurse. A report by The Strategy Unit (2025) highlights that many carers feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of monitoring medical equipment like CPAP machines.

They are the ones who must ensure that the mask fits properly and that the machine is plugged in. In addition, we must face up to the "digital divide." The Journal of Medical Internet Research (2025) has already noted that "digital exclusion" is a potential threat to health equity. A patient in poverty may not have reliable high-speed internet or even the newest smartphone needed for remote monitoring. If the NHS is not careful, virtual wards will become something for the digitally competent while leaving those most at risk behind.

True community impact means we provide hardware, data, and training to all regardless of background.

Positive and Negative Components (Balance Analysis) The move toward virtual care involves a complicated narrative of trade-offs. To see things in their entirety, it is necessary to weigh clinical and economic benefits against human costs.

Category Pros (Human and Clinical) Cons (Risks and Challenges)

Patient Care Quicker recovery in an environment with which they are familiar; preservation of dignity and autonomy; potential for social isolation for patients living alone or without family support.

Workforce Career longevity for senior staff with digital skills being acquired and flexibility enjoyed by nurses; risk of screen fatigue plus loss of physical "healing touch" nursing provides.

Technology (CPAP) ICU-level respiratory support at home with real-time safety monitoring; anxiety concerning technical failures, power cuts, or equipment complexity. Service Delivery Improved A&E throughput plus savings per head (£1,958); better bed flow; high initial capital costs on software and kit delivery logistics.

Community Impact Better integration between GPs and hospitals plus families staying together; heavy emotional and physical burden on unpaid family members and carers.

Conclusion

Virtual wards are more than just a technological upgrade; they represent an NHS commitment to meet patients where they are at. We learned from tools such as the CPAP machine that with data, team, and heart aligned properly, home can become a space for sophisticated healing. Evidence shows it: patients prefer this way, systems need it so much now, technology supports it too.

Going forward though our challenge shall be keeping 'human' in virtual! Technology should always be that bridge connecting us but never ever let it be a wall separating us! Let's continue supporting our staff through this transition journey while empowering those unpaid carers with resources needed plus ensuring no new inequalities arise from our 'digital divide'! If we get this right, then virtual wards would not just be some temporary solution to a bed crisis but rather become one true heartbeat of modern compassionate care delivered by one national health service!

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