

A five day opiate withdrawal programme gives general and mental health nurses the opportunity to help people turn their lives around

Cygnet's unique approach to detox transforms lives

Acute mental health care services support people with a wide range of mental health problems, many of whom live with longstanding conditions either independently or with support from community mental health services. Such people occasionally experience crises and require admission for inpatient care to stabilise them. In many cases a admission for a short period is enough to resolve the crisis and enable them to return home.

Cygnet Health Care is one of the UK's largest independent providers of mental health treatment and associated services. The company has a range of facilities across the country offering a broad spectrum of mental healthcare. Its hospital in Harrogate has a 19-bed acute admissions unit offering standard acute care similar to that seen across the NHS and independent sector.

However, the hospital also offers a unique service to people who are addicted to heroin or other opiates. Its 14-bed Detox 5 centre for opiate detoxification aims to free patients from their physical addiction through an inpatient treatment programme lasting only five days.

Before being accepted onto the Monday-to-Friday programme patients are thoroughly assessed to ensure it is appropriate for them. Sharon Pulling, clinical director at the hospital, says the pre-assessment process is vital.

"We liaise with the patient's family, GP and community drug treatment team as appropriate," she explains. "The assessment looks at the patient's physical and mental health to check they are well enough to go through the programme, but we also assess them psychologically to be sure that they are motivated and ready for it."

Patients' social circumstances are also

assessed to ensure they have appropriate support in place and that they will not be returning to an environment where they are likely to relapse.

"We don't want them going back to a home that they share with other drug users for example," says Sharon.

The majority of Detox 5 patients are referred directly from their GP, although some come via community drug teams with input from the patient's GP. Most are privately funded as government policy on addiction has focused on harm reduction rather than detoxification over the past few years. The current government appears more interested in detoxification, and if this translates into policy change there may be more NHS funding for detoxification programmes like Detox 5.

Patients come to the Detox 5 programme for a comfortable way of withdrawing from

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opiates. They are lightly sedated for the first few days, so they sleep for much of what is usually the most physically difficult time. They also receive symptomatic relief such as pain control and drugs to combat nausea, and are closely monitored to ensure they remain physically healthy.

Housed in private bedrooms patients do not meet each other until the Thursday evening, when they are able to socialise. They are also allowed to make phone calls from a pre-approved list of contacts. These measures are important to prevent patients from discussing their drug use with each other or contacting drug-related contacts outside. For the same reason the unit does not accept patients from the same post code area at the same time.

Towards the end of their Detox programme patients are prescribed naltrexone, an opiate blocker that will rid their body of any remaining opiates. The drug also blocks the euphoria associated with opiate use, so they continue to take the drug for a year after discharge. The drug is administered by a "supervisor" - this may be a family member or friend who agrees to support the patient through the year.

"We believe a year is the right amount of

time for patients to take naltrexone because it gets them through all the good and bad anniversaries – most people who take opiates have something awful in their past so it is important to give them this support," says Sharon.

Some patients are discharged with a naltrexone implant, which releases the drug over a three-month period.

"Since the first three months are the most difficult for patients, an implant can take pressure off their relationship with their supervisor," explains Sharon. "These relationships can sometimes be quite fraught, especially if the supervisor has been coping with the patient's drug use for years, and making sure patients take their medication on a daily basis can add to the pressure."

Due to the nature of the treatment programme and patients' medical needs the Detox 5 unit employs roughly equal numbers of general and mental health nurses, and is looking to recruit more of both groups to its team. In order to work on Detox 5 Sharon says nurses need to be non-judgemental, good communicators and willing to give people another chance.

The unit not only offers nurses a unique setting and treatment programme, but also the opportunity to pick up skills they are unlikely to gain elsewhere as the combination of mental health and general nurses means each group learns from the other.

Sharon, who is herself a general nurse, originally came to Cygnet Hospital Harrogate to work on the unit almost 10 years ago after working in burns and plastic surgery. She is passionate about the service offered on Detox 5.

"It's a quite unique place," she says. "It really turns people's lives round, and the cards and letters we receive really show that. It really is rewarding – especially when you help someone who may have had an opiate addiction for 20 or 30 years. It's also a great feeling when your patients achieve all their objectives in only a week."

"We see patients from all walks of life – a lot of them are quite high fliers who came to heroin via cocaine. The most heartbreaking to me are the ones who are in their thirties and took heroin for six months in their late teens and are coming to us for help in getting off the methadone they have been prescribed ever since. Those people could have been through detox so long ago, so it feels really special to help them."

SERVICES OFFERED BY CYGNET

The company offers a range of services including:

- Addiction treatment
- Private psychiatry
- Counselling and therapy
- Low secure rehabilitation
- Medium secure care
- Psychiatric intensive care
- Borderline personality disorder care
- Eating disorder treatment
- Autism services
- Elderly mental health care