Moving care into the community is a prominent feature of health policy. Nurses have a role to play in the redeployment of services to primary care.

Findings
The scoping review showed that moving hospital outpatient services into the community could benefit patients (Winpenny et al, 2016a). This included GPs with a specialist interest in specialist nurses providing additional services and giving GPs or nurses direct access to a wider range of diagnostic tests. Among the most effective interventions were strategies supporting improved communication between GPs and specialists, such as requests for specialist advice by phone or email, and use of telemedicine.

With some of these models there is a risk of increasing GP workload and demand for specialist care; however, in many cases, levels of patient satisfaction improved. This was mainly due to the increased flexibility of being able to visit a local practice rather than a hospital and the potential of shorter waiting times.

However, for all the approaches there was limited information on cost-effectiveness. It was unclear whether they would increase or reduce demand and whether they would cost more or less than traditional approaches.

Findings from the sub-studies and international comparisons unearthed further challenges. Referral management centres, an initiative that aims to reduce the rising volume of referrals from primary to secondary care, encountered administrative challenges and difficulty getting buy-in from clinicians (Pitchforth and Roland, 2015). International evidence suggested that financial mechanisms and incentives to move care into the community were the most promising interventions, but evidence on their effectiveness was still lacking.

Conclusion
Moving outpatient services into the community can only be justified if higher value is given to patient convenience in relation to NHS costs. As the new models of care described in the NHS Five Year Forward View are rolled out, it is important to look at the costs, as well as the benefits of changes in care delivery.

This project was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Services and Delivery Research Programme (project number 12/135/02).

References

An important question has emerged from these plans: when is there benefit to the patient or the health system to moving hospital services into the community, and when are these services actually better provided in hospitals?

A recent study addressed this question, exploring how outpatient services could be made more efficient (Winpenny et al, 2016a). The study included: the update of an earlier scoping review to make it relevant to the UK in 2016; four sub-studies to explore different types of interventions designed to improve effectiveness or efficiency of referrals; the review of a series of innovative approaches in other countries.

Moving outpatient care into the community

Evidence in brief
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