

Rapid response teams will help elderly at home to free up wards

Chris Smyth Health Editor

NHS “rapid response teams” will be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help frail and elderly patients who fall or suffer infections, Theresa May will say today as she promises to use extra health service cash to keep people out of hospital.

GPs will also get to know care home residents personally in an effort to keep them well at home, while such services will get an extra £3.5 billion a year by 2024 as part of a £20 billion boost promised to the NHS in the summer.

Experts welcomed the ambition but questioned whether the NHS would have the staff to provide the services, and warned that such top-down initiatives often backfired.

The £3.5 billion would only be enough to keep pace with rising numbers of frail and elderly patients rather than transform their care, they added.

The increasing number of frail patients arriving at hospital has been identified as one of the key reasons why the NHS is struggling with overcrowded wards.

Health chiefs have for years been trying to boost local services that give other options to such people or stop them becoming ill in the first place. While some areas have experimented with dedicated teams of doctors and nurses to respond to the emergency needs of the frail elderly, Mrs May wants this to become routine.

“Too often people end up in hospital not because it’s the best place to meet their needs but because the support that would allow them to be treated or recover in their own home just isn’t available,” she will say on a visit to a health centre in north London.

“Many of us might assume that hospital is the safest place to be but in reality many patients would be much

better off being cared for in the community. And the longer a patient stays in hospital the more it costs the NHS and the more pressure is put on its hard-working staff. This needs to change.”

A third of hospital admissions from care homes are avoidable and many people spend longer than they need in hospital, she will add, citing research which estimates that older people’s muscles age by ten years for each ten days they spend in a hospital bed.

“The new approach we’re setting out today will mean more people can leave hospital quicker or avoid being admitted in the first place, which is better for patients and better for the health service,” she will say.

Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, said that guaranteeing the money for local services would help to make the plans a reality.

“Everyone can see that to future-proof the NHS we need to radically redesign how primary and community health services work together,” he said. “For community health services this means quick response to help people who don’t need to be in hospital.”

However, Sally Gainsbury, of the Nuffield Trust think tank, said: “This money will simply allow GPs and community services to keep up with demand over the next five years. That’s important but it means the new money announced today is not going to lead to a significant change.”

She added that there were “serious questions about whether the NHS has the right staff in the right places to carry this out”. She warned: “We would agree the NHS needs to focus on helping people more outside hospital and getting them home more quickly. But the idea of telling every local area to do the exact same thing has often backfired in the NHS, as it is bound to be less well-suited to certain places.”