

Health chiefs ask millions to work as NHS volunteers

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Millions of patients will be pressed to volunteer in the NHS under plans set out by health chiefs who predict that hospitals will become reliant on unpaid help.

All hospitals have been urged to support a campaign encouraging people leaving hospital to give up some time in future to help vulnerable patients, keep them company and assist them with paperwork.

As part of a ten-year plan for the future of the health service, NHS England is backing a campaign to be launched by Helpforce, a charity that aims to boost volunteering in hospitals.

Sir Thomas Hughes-Hallett, who runs the charity, is asking all NHS organisations to let him know where they need help in preparation for a big expansion of volunteering next year. A Christmas advertising campaign will highlight NHS volunteers, of which there are about 74,000 at present, to encourage the public to step forward.

Volunteers, who must be over 16, will be asked to devote at least three hours a week for six months. It is hoped that they will start work in the spring after criminal record checks and training.

Sir Thomas wrote: "The NHS has a proud tradition of volunteering being at

the heart of both the way it is funded and run. At its inception hospitals across the country were supported by philanthropists and volunteers ... Today, with all the complexities of health and care facing the NHS, the role for volunteers in supporting communities is stronger than ever before."

Neil Churchill, director of experience and participation at NHS England, and Ruth May, chief nurse at NHS Improvement, which oversees NHS trusts and other healthcare providers, wrote to all trusts last week to highlight Sir Thomas's letter. "This campaign will raise the profile of volunteering within the NHS to a large public audience and the benefits of volunteering to NHS staff and communities and we hope you will support the campaign by encouraging your organisation to get involved," they wrote. "Volunteering will be an important feature in the forthcoming NHS Long Term Plan, which will recognise the importance of volunteers supporting community-based care."

While health chiefs insist that the scheme will not be used as a cost-cutting alternative to trained staff, they argue that volunteers can do things that hard-pressed doctors and nurses do not have time for, such as comforting frightened dementia patients or ensuring that people do not die alone.