

BUSINESS

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PILOT Peter Range, left, managing director, and David Muxworthy, director, of Home Telehealth who are pioneering technology to improve patient care with their home monitoring system

Picture: Rob Norman

Picture of health at home could free up hospital beds

A SOUTH WALES company is pioneering new technology which could provide an effective solution to counter the costly problem of bed blocking in the health service by monitoring high risk patients from their homes.

With both the UK and Welsh Assembly Governments indicating a willingness to use monitoring technology to ease the pressure on the NHS – which is being exacerbated by an aging population – Cardiff-based Home Telehealth has become the first company to enter into a trial with an NHS trust.

Home Telehealth, which is run by managing director Peter Range and co-director David Muxworthy, is involved in a pilot with Newham University Hospital NHS Trust in East London.

Some 80 patients – with chronic conditions such as congestive heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – are involved in the project using the company's CareCompanion sys-

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Assembly shows interest in tele-health pilot scheme

tem which interacts with them through an easy-to-read touch-screen plugged into the telephone.

The system provides reminders [like taking medication], collects vital signs data from various medical devices and asks questions that help assess the condition of the patient.

The system then automatically sends the data to a web-based server through the patient's home telephone line.

Designated carers are notified by the system if readings exceed thresholds preset by the nurse.

Mr Muxworthy said the pilot, which finishes next spring, was proceeding positively and the company was in negotiations to roll out similar projects with

other trusts across the UK.

Mr Muxworthy, formerly of the Welsh Development Agency, said a widespread take-up of tele-health technology in the UK had the potential to save the Government millions of pounds on its NHS budget.

He added, "A recent Audit Commission concluded that if the technology is used properly in the area of congestive heart failure alone it could potentially save the Government £120m annually.

"In the UK there are 17 million people with at least one chronic disease. For those over the age of 65 as many as 80% have at least one chronic disease.

"The over-65s make up 16% of the population (17% in Wales), but account for 70% of the UK's

health budget, which is projected to rise to £92bn by 2008.

"The elderly are living longer, but tele-health can provide them with the option of remaining independent and living happily at home, even if they have a chronic disease."

Just one hospital bed a night costs the taxpayer £500, while tele-health can be introduced from as little as £50 a week.

People admitted to hospital on a regular basis [mostly the elderly] represents only 3% of the total number of hospital in-patients, but account for 40% of beds.

"We need to target this high risk 3% and get them out of hospital and monitored from home with the use of tele-health technology – which would free up much needed hospital beds," said Mr Muxworthy.

"Many people are re-admitted simply because they have failed to take the right levels or combinations of medication, something which tele-health can address."

As part of the drive towards

tele-health the Assembly's Health Minister Dr Brian Gibbons has announced a significant investment in the emerging sector, with possibly more in the pipeline.

Mr Muxworthy said that Home Telehealth's strategy was to maintain its presence in Wales and grow organically.

"We plan to attract other players in the sector and work alongside them to create a vibrant tele-health cluster here in Wales," he said.

"Wales is already seen as an exemplar for tele-health because its broadband infrastructure, linking key areas like hospitals and GP practices, is so good.

"What we have to do is to ensure that we really capitalise on this going forward."

And he is confident that Home Telehealth is well placed for accelerated growth.

"In 5 to 7 years' time we believe we have the potential to become at least a £20m turnover business.