

Making a Difference in a Crisis: How the 24-Hour Surgical Ambulatory Assessment Unit Transformed Emergency Care during COVID-19

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Abstract : Background: The Surgical Ambulatory Unit (SAU) also known as the Same Day Emergency Care (SDEC) is an established part of many hospitals providing same day emergency care service to surgical patients who would have otherwise required admission through the A&E. Prior to Covid, the SAU was functioning as a 12-hour service, but during the Covid crisis this service was transformed to a 24 hour functioning Surgical Ambulatory Assessment unit (SAAU). We studied the effects that this change brought about in-patient care in our hospital. Objective: The objective of the study was to assess the impact of a 24-hour Surgical Ambulatory Assessment unit on patient care during the time of Covid, in particular its role in freeing A&E capacity and delivering effective patient care. Methods: We collected two sets of data retrospectively. The first set was collected over a 6-week period when the SAU was functioning at the Princess Royal University Hospital. On March 23rd, 2020, the SAU was transformed into a 24-hour SAAU. Following this transformation, a second set of patient data was collected over a period of 6 weeks. A comparison was made between data collected from when the hospital had a 12-hour Surgical Ambulatory unit and later when it was transformed into a 24-hour facility. Its effects on the change in the number of patients breaching the four hour waiting period and the number of emergency surgical admissions. Results: The 24-hour Surgical Ambulatory Assessment unit brought significant reductions in the number of patients breaching the waiting period of 4 hours in A&E from 44% during the period of the 12-hour Surgical Ambulatory care facility to 0% from when the 24-hour Surgical Ambulatory Assessment Unit was established. A 28% reduction was also seen in the number of surgical patients' admissions from A&E. Conclusions: The 24-hour SAAU was found to have a profound positive impact on emergency care of surgical patients. Especially during the Covid crisis, it played a crucial role in providing not only effective and accessible patient care but also in reducing the A&E workload and admissions. It thus proved to be a strategic tool that helped to deal with the immense workload in emergency care during the Covid crisis and helped free much needed headspace at a time of uncertainty for the A&E to better configure their services. If sustained, the 24-hour SAAU could be relied on to augment the NHS emergency services in the future, especially in the event of another crisis.

Keywords : Princess Royal University Hospital, surgical ambulatory assessment unit, surgical ambulatory unit, same day emergency care

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