‘As easy as breathing’ describes something so simple, it needs no effort. But for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, breathing is anything but easy.

As the disease progresses, many patients will experience periods where they are gasping for air and gripped by panic. ‘The symptoms can be at least as severe as having lung cancer, while patients’ quality of life and emotional wellbeing is worse,’ says nurse consultant Matthew Hodson of Homerton University Hospital in Hackney, east London.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) kills 25,000 people a year in the UK, and an estimated three million people are living with the disease in England. The annual cost to the NHS is about £1 billion.

Yet despite its prevalence, Mr Hodson says there is often little support for patients, particularly in the latter phase of the illness. It was to address this gap in services that he set up the Breathing Space clinic in 2011 to help patients in the advanced stages of COPD, who are approaching the end of their life.

Now his work has been recognised with Nursing Standard’s prestigious nurse of the year award. ‘To be recognised with a national award is amazing,’ he says. ‘I want to use it to raise the profile of respiratory nursing and end of life care.’

Mr Hodson originally wanted to become a primary school teacher, but in 1995, aged 20, he spent nine months as a healthcare support worker on a stroke ward at Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth. ‘I enjoyed talking to patients and their families, helping them through a difficult time,’ he recalls.

Traditional COPD is viewed as an old man’s disease associated with heavy smoking and dangerous occupations such as mining. But there are many younger people and women with COPD.

Matthew Hodson was named Nurse 2013 last night at a ceremony in London. Lynne Pearce reveals why

I WAS THE FIRST PERSON IN POST... I HAVE NOT SAT STILL FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS

He was noticeably good at it too. ‘I got great feedback and when I was asked whether I had ever thought about a career in nursing, before I knew it, I had started a nursing course.’

Qualifying in 1998 at King Alfred’s College in Winchester, his first post as a staff nurse was in the respiratory ward at the Royal Hampshire Country Hospital. Next came six months each in the hospital’s gastrointestinal and A&E departments, before he was drawn back to respiratory nursing, becoming a ward manager in 2002.

‘I get a great deal of satisfaction from supporting people who might be in crisis,’ says Mr Hodson. ‘Patients think, is this my last breath? Am I going to suffocate? I try to help them understand that while it is a long-term condition and there is no cure, we can help them to manage their symptoms so they feel better.’

Nurse of the Year offers hope to COPD patients

Matthew Hodson was named Nurse 2013 last night at a ceremony in London. Lynne Pearce reveals why
COPD, says Mr Hodson, and their numbers are growing. COPD is moving up the health agenda – a new action plan for respiratory disease treatment was published by the DH last May, targeting variation in diagnosis and treatment around the country.

Specialist respiratory nurses can play a major role in improving care, so when Mr Hodson spotted an advert for a post at Barts and the London NHS Trust in 2005, he jumped at the chance.

For the previous year he had been an operations manager for East Hampshire Primary Care Trust. ‘I missed the nursing element,’ he says.

Two years later he moved into primary care with another specialist post in Westminster. Then in 2009, came the chance to marry his community and hospital experience as a nurse consultant at Homerton. The trust had won a bid to provide outreach care for COPD patients.

‘I was the first person in post, so I could create the outreach vision from paper,’ says Mr Hodson. ‘I have not sat still for the past three years.’

What makes the acute COPD early response service unusual is that it runs across both primary and secondary care, involving everyone from GP practices to A&E. ‘It is not them and us anymore,’ says Mr Hodson.

‘I can be in a GP surgery one day, then a hospital ward or a patient’s home. I can be doing research or supporting a team. There is such a breadth to this kind of nursing,’ he says.

The idea for the Breathing Space clinic came when the trust was commissioned to provide advanced and end of life care.

He drew on the experience of colleagues in palliative care, meeting with staff at the local hospice, St Joseph’s, who were also thinking about how best to provide services for patients with non-malignant disease.

The clinic runs once a month, seeing three to seven patients. It is based at the hospice, but much of the service is replicated at home for patients too unwell to travel.

Nurses identify patients who they feel would benefit from the clinic’s specialist support, for instance those with uncontrolled symptoms or who have had several hospital admissions in the previous 12 months.

A multidisciplinary team then scrutinises the case and makes the final decision to refer.

Patients are booked in for appointments of up to two hours, which allow for an assessment around four areas: physical, psychosocial, spiritual and wellbeing. A care plan is drawn up that might involve counselling, complementary therapies, physiotherapy, exercise, help with breathing control and education.

Tailored care
Referrals are made to whoever can help – for example, the social work team or a speech and language therapist. ‘It is a directory of services and depends entirely on the person’s needs,’ explains Mr Hodson. Relatives can receive information about how to care for their loved one.

The clinic’s location in a hospice has been an issue for some patients who have lived in the East End for a long time. ‘They have relatives who went into the hospice and never came out again, so they see it as somewhere people go to die,’ Mr Hodson says. The team explains that St Joseph’s has changed, with many people now visiting for just a day and returning home.

So far, the clinic has supported 30 patients, and received positive responses. ‘One patient told me this is somewhere to learn to live,’ says Mr Hodson.

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Breathing Space clinic was set up by Matthew Hodson in 2011, bringing end of life care to patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. As nurse of the year he hopes to raise the profile of the condition and awareness of care options.