

CIVITAS: Online Briefing – June 2007

Waiting times in the NHS

The NHS Plan (2000) identified the public's top concern about the NHS as waiting for treatment:

“Waiting to see a GP, waiting to be seen in a casualty department, waiting to get into hospital and, sometimes, waiting to get out of hospital...too often patients have to wait too long.”

Subsequently, the government set a number of targets to reduce waiting times, using the extra funds at the NHS' disposal. These have, on the whole, been successful:

- **To guarantee access to a GP within 48 hours by 2004:**

| | % of patients offered an appointment with a GP within 48hrs |
|-------------------|--|
| March 2002 | 74.64 |
| March 2004 | 97.36 |
| March 2006 | 99.94 |

Source: DH, Chief Executive's Report to the NHS, Statistical Supplement, June 2006

http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&did=21837&Rendition=Web

- **To reduce the maximum waiting time in A&E from arrival to admission, transfer or discharge to 4 hours by the end of 2004:**

| | Activity in major A&E departments (<u>NOT</u> inc. minor injury units and Walk-in Centres) | |
|---------------------|---|---|
| | Total attendances | % of patients who spent less than 4 hrs in A&E |
| 2002/03 – Q4 | 2,931,000 | 82 |
| 2004/05 – Q4 | 3,249,000 | 96 |
| 2006/07 – Q4 | 3,292,265 | 97 |

Source: DH, Hospital Activity Statistics, 2007

http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/hospitalactivity/data_requests/total_time_ae.htm

- **To reduce the maximum waiting time for an outpatient appointment to 3 months (13 weeks) by 2005:**

| | Outpatient waiting times; patients still waiting to be seen at end of quarter | |
|---------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| | Total waiting | Total waiting 13 + weeks |
| 1999/00 – Q4 | - | 393,000 |
| 2004/05 – Q4 | 1,402,000 | 30,303 |
| 2006/07 – Q4 | 953,249 | 81 |

Source: DH, *Hospital Waiting Times/List Statistics, 2007* (Commissioner based)

<http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/waitingtimes/index.htm>

- **To reduce the maximum waiting time for inpatient treatment to 6 months (26 weeks) by 2005, and 3 months (13 weeks) by 2008:**

| | Waiting lists for inpatient treatment | | |
|---------------------|--|---|---|
| | Total waiting for admission | Total waiting more than 13 weeks | Total waiting more than 26 weeks |
| 1999/00 – Q4 | 1,037,000 | 507,000 | 264,000 |
| 2004/05 – Q4 | 906,000 | 259,000 | 41,000 |
| 2006/07 – Q4 | 691,885 | 114,476 | 352 |

Source: DH, *Hospital Waiting Times/List Statistics, 2007* (Commissioner based)

<http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/waitingtimes/index.htm>

However, the statistics, while impressive, do hide a number of caveats:

- Perhaps most seriously, waiting time targets (and others) have sometimes served to distort clinical priorities and work against patient choice – what has been termed ‘gaming’. A separate briefing will be written on this important issue, but to give one example: the Healthcare Commission in 2005 found that just over 30% of primary care patients surveyed could no longer book a GP appointment more than 3 days in advance – presumably to free up appointment slots to ensure the 48hour target was met.

- Despite the dramatic fall in excessive waits, there are still near 700,000 people on waiting lists for inpatient treatment and over 950,000 waiting for an outpatient appointment.
- More people are waiting longer than it might at first seem. The statistic on waiting times for an outpatient appointment measures the number of people waiting for an appointment *at that given point in time*. In fact, across the year 2006/07, 32,914 people waited longer than the 13-week target (though still a massive improvement on the 527,901 in 1999/00).
- While the longest waits have been eliminated, there has been far less change in the average (mean) time waited. In fact patients already waiting somewhat under 3 months for inpatient treatment may now be waiting longer; *median waiting times have actually increased*:

| | Waiting times for inpatient treatment (days) | |
|--------------|--|--------|
| | Mean | Median |
| 1999/00 – Q4 | 91 | 43 |
| 2001/02 – Q4 | 96 | 47 |
| 2004/05 – Q4 | 84 | 52 |
| 2005/06 – Q4 | 78 | 51 |

Source: The Information Centre, Hospital Episode Statistics, 2007 (Commissioner based)
<http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=209>

- The inpatient and outpatient waiting time targets measure the time from a GP referral to the first outpatient appointment, and the time from when a patient is placed on a surgery waiting list to inpatient treatment. *But this does not represent the entire patient 'pathway'*, because it neglects time taken in between for diagnosis: the 'hidden wait'. The former Liberal Democrat health spokesman, Paul Burstow MP, drew attention to this in a report in December 2004, which revealed that in two out of five NHS Trusts patients were waiting up to six months or more for routine MRI scans.

The Healthcare Commission in its annual State of Healthcare report (2005) also found evidence that some NHS Trusts had used time taken for diagnostic tests as time deducted off official waiting times in order to meet the headline targets. *Clearly patients are still*

waiting a lot longer for hospital treatment than inpatient and outpatient waiting times suggest.

Subsequently the government introduced an expectation that by the end of March 2007 **patients should receive diagnostics within 13 weeks of their first outpatient appointment**, as part of the ambitious wider goal outlined in the NHS Improvement Plan (2004) that **by 2008, no one will have to wait longer than 18 weeks from GP referral to hospital treatment (RTT).**

The first set of data on this '18 week pathway' was released on 7 June 2007. It shows that 52% of patients still wait longer than 18 weeks between a GP referral and their admission to hospital, and more alarmingly that *12% are still waiting over a year*:

| | Referral to treatment (RTT) times for patients whose 18-week clock stopped during the month with an inpatient/day case admission (March 2007, Commissioner based) | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| | Total patients (known clock start) | % waiting more than 18 weeks | % waiting more than 26 weeks | % waiting more than 52 weeks |
| Total | 208,127 | 52 | 36 | 12 |
| e.g. Trauma & Orthopaedics | 35,069 | 75 | 58 | 18 |
| Oral surgery | 11,156 | 63 | 41 | 7 |
| Gastroenterology | 5,922 | 24 | 17 | 9 |
| Thoracic medicine | 824 | 21 | 15 | 7 |

Source: DH, Hospital Waiting Times/List Statistics, 2007 (Commissioner based)

<http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/rtt/commissioner.html>

It should be said that the figures do represent a noteworthy improvement on the 35% of patients the DH estimates were seen within 18 weeks last year. However, the majority of people still wait longer than 18 weeks, and a number of statistics hidden in the data suggest the NHS has a massive, and probably insurmountable, challenge to meet the 18-week RTT target by 2008 without compromising patient care:

- The new statistics are still incomplete, based on a snapshot of c.60% of patients treated. As yet we do not know how long the 'pathway' is for the other 40%.
- *A substantial number of patients are still waiting significantly longer than 18 weeks; 36% are waiting beyond 26 weeks and 12% are waiting beyond a year.*
- *There are real variations in the time waited by patients both geographically and across medical specialities.* For example, just 25% of orthopaedic patients are seen within 18 weeks, compared with 79% of those receiving thoracic medicine; and just 33% of patients in the South East Coast SHA are treated within the target compared with 60% in the East Midlands SHA. It will be incredibly difficult for those with low proportions of patients treated within the target to turn this around in little over a year.
- There have been noticeable improvements in the time waited for diagnostics, where the longest waits in the 'pathway' are experienced, particularly in two of the most important diagnostic areas; MRI scans and CT scans:

| | Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Scans | | |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Total waiting | Total waiting 13+ weeks | Total waiting 26+ weeks |
| March 2006 | 101,320 | 11,745 | 689 |
| March 2007 | 99,230 | 2,026 | 42 |

| | Computer Tomography (CT) Scans | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Total waiting | Total waiting 13+ weeks | Total waiting 26+ weeks |
| March 2006 | 56,336 | 2,190 | 216 |
| March 2007 | 56,830 | 121 | - |

Source: DH, Hospital Waiting Times/List Statistics, 2007 (Commissioner based)

<http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/diagnostics/commissioner.html>

However, *the NHS remains some way off meeting the goal that patients receive all diagnostics within 13 weeks of their first outpatient appointment* (which will have to be considerably less than this if the 18-week pathway is to be met):

| | All diagnostics | | |
|------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Total waiting | Total waiting 13+ weeks | Total waiting 26+ weeks |
| March 2006 | 805,592 | 202,656 | 99,789 |
| March 2007 | 700,396 | 109,094 | 76,493 |

Source: DH, Hospital Waiting Times/List Statistics, 2007 (Commissioner based)

<http://www.performance.doh.gov.uk/diagnostics/commissioner.html>

International picture

A number of international surveys, such as that by Blendon et al. (2002) and Siciliani and Hurst (OECD, 2003), have shown how waiting times in the UK (particularly for elective surgery) have historically been very high in comparison to other countries.

According to surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 by the Commonwealth Fund, this remains the case despite improvements. For example, merely 6% of primary care physicians in the UK thought their patients 'rarely or never experience long waiting times for diagnostic tests', compared with 76% in Germany; and 41% of respondents in the UK reported waiting longer than 4 months for elective surgery, compared with just 6% in Germany and 8% in the US:

| | % Primary care physicians who think their patients <i>rarely or never</i> experience long waiting times for diagnostic tests* | Waiting time for emergency care was greater than 2 hours (%) (base: used an emergency room in past 2 years) | Waiting time of 4 months or more for elective surgery (%) (base: those needing elective surgery in past year) |
|---------------|---|---|---|
| Australia | 55 | 33 | 19 |
| Canada | 9 | 42 | 33 |
| Germany | 76 | 15 | 6 |
| New Zealand | 19 | 26 | 20 |
| UK | 6 | 30 | 41 |
| United States | 48 | 29 | 8 |

*Based on the 2005 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey of Sicker Adults and *the 2006 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey of Primary Care Physicians.

Source: Commonwealth Fund, *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: An International Update on the Comparative Performance of American Health Care*, May 2007

http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/Davis_mirrormirrorinternationalupdate_1027.pdf?section=4039

While real improvements have been seen in cutting waiting times, the NHS clearly still has some distance to travel to 'consign waiting times to history' and to get to a similar situation as, for example, in France and Germany where waiting lists are virtually unheard of.

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