

UPDATE ON THE WAITING LIST REDUCTION PROGRAM

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The October issue of the *Public Health Bulletin* contained an article describing the initial results of the Waiting List Reduction Program to the end of September 1995¹. This report updates the results to the end of October.

The Program was introduced to improve access to elective surgery services in public hospitals throughout NSW. The aim is to reduce the March 31, 1995 elective surgery waiting lists by 50 per cent within 12 months, concentrating on people who have been waiting more than six months for surgery.

RESULTS

By October 31 the elective surgery waiting list had decreased from 44,707 to 29,780 patients, a reduction of 14,927 patients (33 per cent) (Table 5).

Since March 31 the number of people waiting longer than 12 months has declined by 1,343 (59 per cent), and the number waiting between six and 12 months has fallen by 3,674 (58 per cent) (Table 6). The waiting list has already

been halved for people waiting more than six months; the most significant effect of the Program has been the reduction in the number of people waiting more than six months by over 5,000.

Particularly significant were reductions in numbers of people waiting longer than six months for procedures such as cholecystectomy (down by 207 or 70 per cent), cataract extraction (down by 771 or 63 per cent), tonsillectomy (down by 416 or 67 per cent) varicose vein stripping and ligation (down by 303 or 72 per cent) and total hip replacement (down by 78 or 43 per cent).

The average waiting time of patients treated in the course of a month rose from 1.4 months in March to 1.7 months in October. This reflects large numbers of admissions of patients who have been waiting long periods. The clearance time has reduced to 1.4 months from 1.8 months, indicating patients have been admitted more quickly. The average time on the list has fallen from 3.6 months to 2.8 months, indicating patients are waiting on the list almost a month less (Table 7). This overall pattern is reflected in most Areas and Districts (Table 7).

In the period from July 1, 1994 to March 31, 1995 admissions increased by 2.5 per cent compared with the corresponding period a year previously. Then between April

TABLE 5

REDUCTIONS IN WAITING LISTS BY AREA AND DISTRICT HEALTH SERVICE, MARCH TO OCTOBER, 1995

Area/District/Institution	Number on list		Total reduction	
	March 31, 1995	October 31, 1995*	Number	%
Central Sydney	2,779	2,004	-775	-27.9
Northern Sydney	2,708	1,689	-1,019	-37.6
Western Sydney	4,650	2,168	-2,482	-53.4
Wentworth	2,122	1,475	-647	-30.5
South West Sydney	4,514	3,127	-1,387	-30.7
Central Coast	2,317	1,660	-657	-28.4
Hunter	4,178	3,408	-770	-18.4
Illawarra	2,778	2,064	-714	-25.7
South Eastern Sydney	7,190	4,152	-3,038	-42.3
Royal Alexandra Hospital	792	713	-79	-10.0
Barwon	43	29	-14	-32.6
Castlereagh	51	5	-46	-90.2
Central Western	588	560	-28	-4.8
Clarence	199	11	-188	-94.5
Evans	330	225	-105	-31.8
Far West	204	149	-55	-27.0
Hume	413	226	-187	-45.3
Lachlan	111	59	-52	-46.8
Lower North Coast	1,071	740	-331	-30.9
Macleay-Hastings	385	200	-185	-48.1
Macquarie	813	636	-177	-21.8
Mid North Coast	887	531	-356	-40.1
Monaro	59	50	-9	-15.3
Murray	16	20	4	25.0
Murrumbidgee	-	-	-	-
New England	404	279	-125	-30.9
North West	1,213	695	-518	-42.7
Orana	33	30	-3	-9.1
Richmond	681	432	-249	-36.6
Riverina	1,276	850	-426	-33.4
South Coast	89	24	-65	-73.0
Southern Tablelands	187	57	-130	-69.5
Tweed Valley	824	574	-250	-30.3
Port Macquarie Base Hospital	802	938	136	17.0
New South Wales	44,707	29,780	-14,927	-33.4

Source: Department of Health Reporting System, November 9, 1995

* Excludes transfers. List transfers, in general, are an administrative change and not a change in local demand. They are therefore not taken into account when estimating changes in the number of patients on a list.

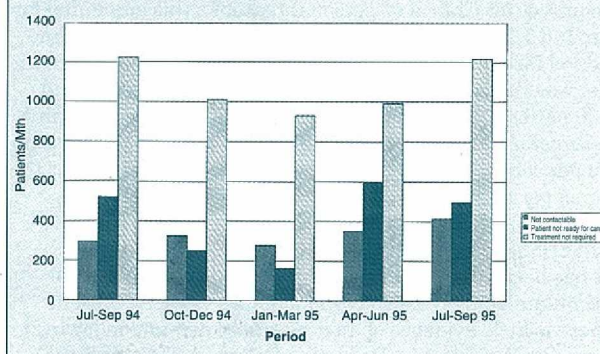
and October 1995, the total number of admissions to hospitals in NSW rose by 35,744 – or 4.8 per cent – compared with the corresponding period in 1994. On an annual basis this is equivalent to more than 60,000 extra admissions. Thus the increase in admissions attributable to the Waiting List Reduction Program to October 31, 1995 is estimated to have been 2.3 per cent, representing 28,000 admissions on an annual basis.

It is also estimated that, to October 31, 1995, at least 16,386 extra procedures were performed as part of the Waiting List Reduction Program. This is likely to be an underestimate because, in mid-1994, a large number of medical procedures, such as endoscopies and chemotherapy, was erroneously coded as surgery. Most of the increase occurred in the period June-October 1995, but there was some minor increase in April and May. The rate of increase of elective surgery was 11.2 per cent, more than double the general increase (total all programs) of 4.8 per cent in the same period (Table 8).

The changes in listing status over the past five quarters are shown in Figure 2. The main reason for removal of patients from waiting lists was that the treatment was no longer

FIGURE 2

LISTING STATUS CHANGES FROM READY FOR CARE (EXCLUDING ADMISSIONS)



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TABLE 6

REDUCTIONS IN PATIENTS ON AREA AND DISTRICT WAITING LISTS, OCTOBER, 1995
PATIENTS WAITING LONGER THAN SIX MONTHS

Area/District/Institution	NUMBER ON LIST							
	Waiting 6-12 months				Waiting > 12 months			
	Reduction				Reduction			
	Mar 31, 1995	Oct 31, 1995	Number	%	Mar 31, 1995	Oct 31, 1995	Number	%
Central Sydney	116	19	-97	-84	15	0	-15	-100
Northern Sydney	404	107	-297	-74	173	100	-73	-42
Western Sydney	836	139	-697	-83	295	74	-221	-75
Wentworth	340	125	-215	-63	293	134	-159	-54
South West Sydney	555	309	-246	-44	191	143	-48	-25
Central Coast	398	254	-144	-36	107	25	-82	-77
Hunter	768	415	-353	-46	179	94	-85	-47
Illawarra	463	181	-282	-61	173	74	-99	-57
South Eastern Sydney	1,150	467	-683	-59	559	161	-398	-71
Royal Alexandra Hospital	25	8	-17	-68	11	-	-11	-100
Barwon	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Castlereagh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Central Western	80	57	-23	-29	8	8	-	-
Clarence	1	-	-1	-100	-	-	-	-
Evans	2	-	-2	-100	-	-	-	-
Far West	1	-	-1	-100	-	-	-	-
Hume	25	14	-11	-44	4	-	-4	-100
Lachlan	13	-	-13	-100	-	-	-	-
Lower North Coast	207	146	-61	-29	52	1	-51	-98
Macleay-Hastings	101	10	-91	-90	46	6	-40	-87
Macquarie	164	58	-106	-65	41	42	1	2
Mid North Coast	150	31	-119	-79	4	1	-3	-75
Monaro	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Murray	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Murrumbidgee	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New England	26	-	-26	-100	1	-	-1	-100
North West	169	61	-108	-64	16	2	-14	-88
Orana	4	1	-3	-75	-	2	2	-
Richmond	95	31	-64	-67	1	4	3	300
Riverina	199	82	-117	-59	77	5	-72	-94
South Coast	4	2	-2	-50	-	-	-	-
Southern Tablelands	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tweed Valley	79	20	-59	-75	19	-	-19	-100
Port Macquarie Base Hosp	3	167	164	5,467	-	46	46	-
New South Wales	6,379	2,705	-3,674	-58	2,265	922	-1,343	-59

Source: Department of Health Reporting System, November 9, 1995

Update on waiting lists

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required (for clinical or personal reasons); this accounted for around 1,200 patients, virtually unchanged from the same period last year. The next major reason for removal from the list was that the patients were not ready for care (around 500 patients a month, again similar to last year). The third reason for removal from the list was that the patient was no longer contactable. This has increased by about 100 over the same period last year.

DISCUSSION

It has been suggested that reductions in waiting lists stimulate an increase in demand for services. At present there is little evidence of an accelerated demand following from the Waiting List Reduction Program. This confirms recent overseas findings² that induced demand resulting from substantial reductions in waiting lists is, at least in the short term, rather small. It will be interesting to see whether a surge in demand is apparent early in 1996.

Predicted changes observed in the flow patterns are the result of growing and relatively under-resourced areas being able to provide more of their residents with services locally. Examples are the Wentworth and Central Coast Areas.

It is now appropriate to direct the focus of attention to waiting times and the achievement of best practice in the management of elective patients. Future issues for consideration may include development of benchmarks for:

- patients allocated clinical urgency codes of 1 (should be admitted within seven days) or 2 (should be admitted within one month);
- theatre utilisation;
- admissions delayed by hospital constraints; and
- same day surgery.

1. Shiraev N, McGarry J. Waiting List Reduction Program: initial results. *NSW Public Health Bulletin* 1995; 6(10):106-109.

2. Martin S, Smith P. Modelling waiting times for elective surgery. Centre for Health Economics, The University of York, 1995.

TABLE 7

VARIATIONS IN WAITING TIMES BY AREA AND DISTRICT HEALTH SERVICE, MARCH TO OCTOBER, 1995

Area/District/Institution	WAITING TIMES (Months)								
	Expected waiting time			Average waiting time			Average time on list		
	Mar 31, 95	Oct 31, 95	Variation*	Mar 31, 95	Oct 31, 95	Variation*	Mar 31, 95	Oct 31, 95	Variation*
Central Sydney	1.1	0.9	-0.3	1.0	0.9	0.1	1.5	1.0	-0.5
Northern Sydney	1.3	1.0	-0.3	0.9	2.3	1.4	3.5	2.8	-0.7
Western Sydney	1.9	1.3	-0.6	1.6	1.5	0.0	4.1	2.6	-1.5
Wentworth	2.6	1.7	-0.9	2.1	2.6	0.4	5.9	4.4	-1.4
South West Sydney	1.7	1.5	-0.2	1.4	1.6	0.2	3.3	3.4	0.2
Central Coast	2.5	2.1	-0.4	1.9	2.2	0.3	4.0	3.0	-1.0
Hunter	2.0	1.8	-0.2	1.6	1.8	0.2	3.7	3.1	-0.6
Illawarra	2.4	1.7	-0.6	2.3	2.3	0.0	3.9	2.9	-1.1
South Eastern Sydney	1.7	1.4	-0.3	1.2	1.5	0.2	4.2	3.2	-1.0
Royal Alexandra Hospital	1.3	2.3	0.9	1.3	1.0	-0.3	1.6	1.4	-0.2
Barwon	0.6	0.4	-0.2	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.7	0.3	-0.4
Castlereagh	0.6	0.4	-0.2	0.5	0.8	0.3	0.5	3.1	2.6
Central Western	1.4	1.4	0.0	1.1	1.7	0.6	2.6	2.7	0.1
Clarence	1.6	0.5	-1.1	0.4	0.4	0.0	1.9	0.4	-1.5
Evans	0.9	0.8	-0.1	0.8	0.8	0.0	1.1	1.0	-0.1
Far West	1.4	1.1	-0.2	0.9	1.1	0.2	1.4	1.1	-0.3
Hume	0.8	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.7	-0.2	2.0	1.9	-0.2
Lachlan	0.9	0.5	-0.4	0.3	0.7	0.3	2.1	1.4	-0.8
Lower North Coast	5.4	2.5	-2.9	3.8	4.3	0.5	3.8	3.2	-0.7
Macleay-Hastings	2.2	1.3	-0.9	2.1	1.2	-0.8	4.8	2.0	-2.8
Macquarie	2.6	2.3	-0.3	1.5	2.1	0.6	4.0	3.6	-0.4
Mid North Coast	3.5	1.4	-2.2	2.4	1.8	-0.6	2.9	2.2	-0.7
Monaro	0.7	0.8	0.1	0.9	0.9	0.0	1.0	0.5	-0.5
Murray	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.5	0.4	-0.1
Murrumbidgee	0.0	0.7	0.7	0.0	0.6	0.6	0.0	1.0	1.0
New England	1.5	1.2	-0.4	1.6	1.0	-0.6	1.9	0.9	-1.0
North West	2.4	1.8	-0.6	2.0	2.0	0.0	3.0	2.3	-0.7
Orana	1.6	1.7	0.1	1.6	3.1	1.4	2.9	2.8	-0.1
Richmond	1.1	0.9	-0.2	1.0	0.9	-0.1	2.2	1.8	-0.4
Riverina	3.0	2.3	-0.7	2.9	2.6	-0.4	3.9	2.6	-1.3
South Coast	0.6	1.1	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.2	1.3	2.5	1.2
Southern Tablelands	1.1	0.9	-0.3	0.9	0.9	0.0	3.3	1.1	-2.2
Tweed Valley	2.9	1.8	-1.1	1.9	2.2	0.3	3.0	1.9	-1.1
Port Macquarie Base Hosp	3.0	3.2	0.2	2.0	4.5	2.4	3.0	4.0	0.9
New South Wales	1.8	1.4	-0.4	1.4	1.7	0.3	3.6	2.8	-0.8

Source: Department of Health Reporting System, November 9, 1995

* Rounding during addition may produce minor inconsistencies in totals.

TABLE 8

ADMISSIONS TO HOSPITAL,
APRIL-OCTOBER 1995

Area/District/Institution	ADMISSIONS – ALL PROGRAMS*			ELECTIVE SURGERY ADMISSIONS		
	Total	Increase		Total	Increase due to Waiting List Reduction Program	
		Number	%		Number	%
Central Sydney	79,187	3,406	4.5	16,953	1,637	10.7
Northern Sydney	73,958	2,881	4.1	13,906	771	5.9
Western Sydney	76,706	2,969	4.0	13,863	1,432	11.5
Wentworth	26,760	3,238	13.8	5,558	836	17.7
South Western Sydney	74,123	7,242	10.8	16,672	1,494	9.8
Central Coast	32,560	2,440	8.1	5,930	887	17.6
Hunter	66,335	1,353	2.1	13,004	1,625	14.3
Illawarra	37,340	1,503	4.2	7,366	699	10.5
South Eastern Sydney	109,088	2,595	2.4	24,381	370	1.5
Royal Alexandra Hospital	11,490	638	5.9	3,290	216	7.0
Barwon	4,548	-132	-2.8	735	33	4.7
Castlereagh	4,567	266	6.2	655	100	18.0
Central West	10,661	-48.5	-4.4	2,068	-551	-21.0
Clarence	5,445	334	6.5	684	172	33.6
Evans	9,859	226	2.3	2,445	475	24.1
Far West	4,392	113	2.6	973	214	28.2
Hume	11,288	856	8.2	3,636	839	30.0
Lachlan	6,168	485	8.5	987	-17	-1.7
Lower North Coast	8,295	405	5.1	2,377	601	33.8
Macleay-Hastings	10,006	334	3.5	2,645	861	48.3
Macquarie	12,939	804	6.6	2,495	420	20.2
Mid North Coast	9,422	977	11.6	1,675	756	82.3
Monaro	4,047	-139	-3.3	732	61	9.1
Murray	3,439	-96	-2.7	501	-77	-13.3
Murrumbidgee	7,653	-	-	1,320	64	5.1
New England	8,345	153	1.9	1,930	407	26.7
North West	13,676	26	0.2	3,348	193	6.1
Orana	3,624	175	5.1	114	5	4.6
Richmond	20,543	921	4.7	4,254	657	18.3
Riverina	12,211	528	4.5	2,878	374	14.9
South Coast	8,602	1,101	14.7	1,643	433	35.8
Southern Tablelands	7,937	234	3.0	1,459	50	3.5
Tweed Valley	9,139	393	4.5	2,303	349	17.9
New South Wales	784,353	35,744	4.8	162,780	16,386	11.2

Source: Department of Health Reporting System, Waiting List Information System: Area and District returns.

* Total all admissions, all NSW public hospitals

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