

Address:
110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone:
0131 477 1234
Fax:
0131 477 4567

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 Thursday 16 February 2006

The NHS is cutting long waiting times but meeting future targets will be challenging

The NHS in Scotland has made significant progress towards meeting waiting time targets over recent years but future targets are likely to be challenging.

An Audit Scotland report published today, *Tackling Waiting Times in the NHS in Scotland*, finds that since 2001 the health service has made good progress in reducing the longest waits for inpatient, day case and outpatient care for people with waiting time guarantees.

Deputy Auditor General Caroline Gardner said: 'The NHS in Scotland has made substantial progress in tackling the longest waits but faces pressures that will make future targets challenging to meet. It needs to do more to develop approaches that work across the whole health and community care system to tackle waiting times. We also suggest that the Golden Jubilee National Hospital could be used more efficiently.'

The report says that the number of people with guarantees waiting longer than six months for inpatient or day case treatment has fallen from 11,573 in March 2001 to 1,249 in September 2005, a drop of 89 per cent.

The NHS in Scotland has also made good progress towards meeting outpatient waiting time targets. The total number of people with guarantees waiting over six months for their first appointment fell from 53,579 to 11,854 between September 2004 and September 2005, a decrease of 78 per cent.

However the total number of patients waiting for inpatient and day case treatment has changed little in recent years and the number of patients with Availability Status Code (ASC) has increased. Patients with ASCs do not have waiting time guarantees.

At September 2005, there were 35,048 patients with an ASC waiting for inpatient or day case treatment, up from 28,349 in June 2003. Two thirds of these patients have been waiting for longer than six months.

These trends, as well the abolition of ASCs at the end of 2007 and a reduction in the maximum waiting time from six months to 18 weeks, suggest that meeting future targets will be challenging.

The report says the NHS needs to work more on developing approaches across the whole health and community care system to tackle waiting times. The Scottish Executive should review the balance of its funding between the longer-term development of such whole system approaches and system redesign, and shorter-term approaches to meet current targets.

The report suggests there is potential to involve patients more in decisions about where they are treated and that this could help cut waiting times. A survey undertaken for the report found that two-thirds of patients currently waiting would travel for earlier treatment, but that only about five per cent have been offered this.

Audit Scotland also suggests that the NHS could use the Golden Jubilee National Hospital in Clydebank more efficiently. The hospital offers care to patients from all over Scotland to reduce the longest waiting times.

The report says the GJNH and NHS boards need to work more closely together to better plan activity at the hospital. The hospital exceeds its total activity targets, but in some specialities not all the capacity is used. This, along with factors such as the way it pays doctors, means its costs are high compared with the rest of the NHS in Scotland.

For further information contact Simon Ebbett tel: 0131 624 9924 or Anne McCubbin tel: 0131 624 9970.

Notes to editors

1. The Audit Scotland report looks at waiting time performance for inpatient and day case treatment, new outpatient attendances and cardiac services. It does not cover cancer, emergency care or primary care waiting times.
2. At September 2005, there were 109,992 patients waiting for inpatient or day case treatment, compared to just under 107,000 in March 2001 and just over 114,000 in December 2004.
3. There were 210,586 patients waiting for a first outpatient attendance at September 2005, down from 265,228 in September 2004.
4. Patients who are unavailable or medically unsuitable for treatment are assigned an Availability Status Code (ASC). These patients do not have waiting time guarantees. ASCs will be abolished at the end of 2007. From then, patients who would have been given ASCs will have guarantees and the periods they are unavailable or unfit for treatment will be subtracted from their total waiting times.
5. Audit Scotland commissioned MORI Scotland to undertake a telephone survey of patients' views on their willingness to travel to reduce the time they had to wait for treatment. A sample of 1,000 patients that had been treated in the previous 12 months or were waiting to be seen or treated was interviewed in July 2005. The sample was drawn from all over Scotland and weighted to ensure an adequate number of outpatients and inpatients were included in the survey. For further details, contact Audit Scotland.
6. The Golden Jubilee National Hospital was purchased from the private sector in June 2002 and set up as a national waiting time centre. In 2004/05 it treated just over 18,500 cases, which was slightly more than its target of 18,362. The target for 2005/06 is 26,000. Spending on the GJNH was £46.6m in 2004/05.
7. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website. www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
8. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
9. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.