

Address:
110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone:
0131 477 1234
Fax:
0131 477 4567

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Press release

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Scots clock up 10 million outpatient attendances a year

More patients are being seen in outpatient departments as the NHSS strives to become more patient centered and to deliver care in more flexible ways.

A report by Audit Scotland for the Auditor General shows that, based on the findings of a week long census, there are at least 10 million attendances at outpatient clinics in a year.

However many of these are not being recorded adequately. At present, the only detailed information to be recorded is attendances at clinics led by consultant doctors. The report says national information systems are lagging behind the new trend for clinics to be led by other professionals such as nurses and physiotherapists.

“New ways of working often mean that patients no longer need to be admitted to hospital for certain conditions and treatments,” said Deputy Auditor General Caroline Gardner. “Sometimes it is more appropriate to see a health care professional other than a doctor. But information systems are out of date and need to be overhauled to support these new ways of working. Existing national returns are inadequate to identify the resources required to provide outpatient clinics or even to identify the demand for these clinics.”

The census also found that most outpatients are attending for return appointments and says it is important that trusts review their follow-up arrangements and discharge policies to reduce any unnecessary visits to specialist clinics.

Overall one in seven people (14%) did not turn up for their appointment and, in the worst case specialty (family planning), one in four patients (25%) did not attend.

“This makes outpatient services very difficult to manage,” said Ms Gardner. “Trusts need to look at their booking and communication systems to ensure that these are working properly. They also need to introduce policies to deal with those patients who repeatedly fail to attend without giving reasonable notice.”

The census shows that about one in every hundred clinics was cancelled, affecting less than 1% of outpatients. Some cancelled clinics are unavoidable but the reasons for cancellations need to be closely monitored.

Very few clinics are held outside the traditional 9-5, Monday to Friday working week and most are in traditional settings. Trusts need to look at the potential for meeting patient needs and preferences in different ways such as using specialist GPs, telemedicine or out-reach clinics.

Audit Scotland recommends that a national minimum data set should be agreed to support national and local information needs so that services to patients can be managed more efficiently and effectively. In the longer term, this should for example have a positive impact on waiting times.

For further information contact James Gillies or Katie Fleming on 0131 624 9970/1

Notes

1. 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.
2. 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 Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission.