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New report shows impact of COVID-19 on NSW health system throughout 2021

The Bureau of Health Information (BHI) has today released a report revealing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NSW healthcare services throughout 2021.

Healthcare in Focus – New South Wales and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 – published today alongside the October to December 2021 issue of *Healthcare Quarterly* – examines activity and performance for public hospital and ambulance services, and community-based healthcare in NSW.

BHI Chief Executive Dr Diane Watson said health services were responding to constant change caused by rises and falls in the number of COVID-19 cases.

“Successive waves of the pandemic caused fluctuations in health system activity with the severity of the impact on health services varying between metropolitan, and rural and regional NSW,” said Dr Watson.

The results show how **community-based health services** and their patients adapted to the realities of the pandemic.

“As Delta cases rose in the second half of the year, there was a major shift towards GP appointments via telephone or video call,” said Dr Watson.

Throughout 2021, 23% of Medicare-subsidised GP attendances were virtual care appointments, up from less than 1% in pre-pandemic 2019.

While overall **ambulance** activity in 2021 was up 2.0% on pre-pandemic 2019, there were striking increases in emergency responses to patients with potentially life-threatening conditions during the Delta and Omicron waves.

The weekly number of emergency (priority 1) cases reached almost 13,000 in September, well above 2019 levels of around 11,000.

“Increases in demand for emergency ambulance responses in September and December 2021 were in metropolitan areas, while rural and regional demand was stable throughout the year,” said Dr Watson.

The time it took paramedics to reach emergency patients in metropolitan areas increased during these periods. While the percentage of emergency patients reached within 15 minutes remained relatively stable in rural and regional areas during 2021 it was, like in metropolitan areas, below 2019 levels throughout the year.

Efforts by hospitals to increase **elective surgery** capacity in the first half of 2021 brought the waiting list down to pre-pandemic levels by June, before the Delta wave and subsequent suspension of non-urgent surgery in Sydney hospitals caused it to increase again in metropolitan local health districts.

“In rural and regional local health districts, the waiting list decreased steadily throughout 2021,” said Dr Watson.

“Overall, while the waiting list reached a high for 2021 of 95,102 at the end of October, it was still below the record 101,024 in June 2020.”

At the end of 2021, there were 10,770 patients on the waiting list who had waited longer than recommended, with 9,309 of those in metropolitan local health districts.

Healthcare in Focus – New South Wales and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 also includes results for **emergency departments** and **admitted patients**, along with information regarding COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, breast screening and a range of other measures.

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The *Healthcare in Focus* report and detailed results from *Healthcare Quarterly, October to December 2021* are available at bhi.nsw.gov.au.

Find and compare quarterly results, including for the 77 larger hospitals and 91 local ambulance areas, in the [Bureau of Health Information Data Portal](#). Snapshots of hospital results can also be found in the [Activity and performance profiles](#).