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Healthcare system returns to pre-pandemic levels after COVID-19 shock

The Bureau of Health Information (BHI) has today released its latest *Healthcare in Focus* report, which reveals the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the NSW public healthcare system over the course of 2020.

It coincides with the release of BHI's latest *Healthcare Quarterly* report, showing how NSW public hospital and ambulance services performed during October to December 2020.

BHI Chief Executive Dr Diane Watson said the reports clearly show how our public healthcare system was affected by the pandemic at different stages of the year.

"The arrival of COVID-19 in NSW caused a shockwave that significantly affected activity and performance in our healthcare system, particularly when cases peaked during the initial March–April outbreak," said Dr Watson.

"We do see by the last quarter of 2020 that many of those measures had returned to levels closer to 2019."

Emergency departments

There were 792,671 emergency department attendances in October to December 2020 – the highest for any quarter since BHI began reporting these data in 2010, and up 2.1% compared with the same quarter the previous year.

"EDs were quieter and people had shorter waits in 2020, particularly during the March–April outbreak," said Dr Watson.

"After the sharp drop in late March, weekly ED attendances increased steadily and by the last week of December, there were more than 65,000 attendances – around 500 fewer than the same week in 2019."

The percentage of patients whose treatment started on time increased to 85.7% in mid-April before decreasing gradually to 75.8% by the end of the year (compared with 74% in 2019).

Healthcare in Focus also looks at ED patient experiences in the first half of 2020.

In BHI's Emergency Department Patient Survey, patients rated their overall care more highly in the first half of 2020 than 2019. In June 2020, for example, 68% of patients rated their care as 'very good' compared with 56% at the same time the previous year.

Elective surgery

There were 62,151 elective surgical procedures performed in NSW during October to December 2020, up 4,407 (7.6%) compared with the same quarter the previous year.

"More elective surgical procedures were performed in October to December 2020 than in the final quarter of any year since BHI began reporting in 2010," said Dr Watson.

The suspension of all non-urgent elective surgery in late March caused a sharp drop in the volume of procedures being performed before a resurgence in activity following the staged resumption from late April.

There were 90,177 patients on the waiting list at the end of 2020 – 2.4% more than at the end of 2019 – but down from a record high of 101,124 at the end of June. Of those patients, 5,950 had waited longer than the clinically recommended time frame, up from 1,144 at the end of 2019.

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“The percentage of procedures performed within clinically recommended time frames during October to December 2020 was down around 13 percentage points to around 82%,” said Dr Watson. “However, almost all urgent procedures (99.8%) were performed on time.”

Admitted patients

Patient admissions dropped sharply in March–April before returning to 2019 levels by October to December 2020.

Healthcare in Focus also looks at adult patients’ experiences of admitted care.

“In BHI’s Adult Admitted Patient Survey, patients rated their overall care more highly in the first half of 2020 than 2019,” said Dr Watson. “Ratings of care did fall in April, before stabilising through to the end of June.”

Ambulance

There were 319,505 ambulance responses in October to December 2020 – the highest for any final quarter since BHI began reporting in 2010.

“The number of the highest priority (P1A) responses for patients with life-threatening conditions remained relatively stable during 2020,” said Dr Watson. “However, while the response time for these cases was similar to 2019 during January to June, it increased to longer than 2019 for most of the second half of the year.”

Healthcare in Focus – NSW and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and detailed results from *Healthcare Quarterly*, including at hospital and local health district level, are available at bhi.nsw.gov.au