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Report reveals impact of Omicron surge on NSW healthcare system in early 2022

The Bureau of Health Information (BHI) has today released its latest *Healthcare Quarterly* report, showing activity and performance for public health services in NSW during January to March 2022.

BHI Chief Executive Dr Diane Watson said patients generally had longer waits for emergency department and ambulance services during the quarter, which was marked by high Omicron COVID-19 case numbers and changes to the state's management of the pandemic.

"January to March saw the suspension and subsequent resumption of some non-urgent elective surgery and the relaxing of public health restrictions," said Dr Watson. "As the health system adapted, it continued to experience fluctuations in hospital and ambulance activity and performance."

Ambulance

There were 326,544 ambulance responses, 6.1% more than pre-pandemic levels in 2019. This included a record 9,360 of the most serious priority 1A (P1A) cases.

Dr Watson said: "Demand for ambulance responses continued the steady upward trend seen over the past five years and patients waited longer for paramedics to arrive."

P1A cases had the longest median response time (8.8 minutes) and lowest percentage of responses within the 10-minute target (60.2%) of any quarter since BHI began reporting in 2010.

The median response time for emergency (P1) cases was also the longest of any quarter since 2010, at 15.7 minutes.

Emergency department

There were 734,704 emergency department (ED) attendances, down 2.8% from the same quarter in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, but well above levels seen five years ago.

Seven in 10 patients (70.5%) were seen on time.

Dr Watson said: "In January to March 2022, patients tended to wait longer for treatment in EDs and those arriving by ambulance waited longer for their care to be transferred to ED staff."

There was a notable drop in patients who were admitted to hospital after being treated in the ED – down 15.6% from 2019 to 161,319. These patients also spent longer in the ED before being admitted.

"Just a quarter of patients in ED requiring admission to hospital were admitted within four hours," said Dr Watson. "And one in 10 spent longer than 18 hours and 29 minutes in the ED, up from 13 hours and 25 minutes in 2019."

Elective surgery

There were 38,493 elective surgeries performed in the January to March 2022 quarter, down 27.8% compared with the same period in 2019.

"By the end of March, there were 100,980 people on the waiting list for surgery – almost as many as the record high of 101,024 in mid-2020," said Dr Watson.

Of those waiting for surgery, 18,627 had waited longer than clinically recommended. Almost all of these patients were in the non-urgent and semi-urgent categories.

One in 10 patients who received non-urgent surgery had waited longer than 465 days, which is the longest on record.

Detailed results are available at bhi.nsw.gov.au.

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Find and compare 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](#).