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Covid-19: Waiting times in England reach record highs

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More than 83 000 patients in England waited more than a year for NHS treatment in July, the highest number since October 2008 and an 81-fold increase from 1032 in July last year, latest figures have shown.¹

The number of people who had been on waiting lists for more than 18 weeks in July was also the highest since records began in 2007, at 2.15 million. Just 46.8% of patients were treated within 18 weeks in July, against the 92% target—the lowest since records began, data from NHS England showed. The average wait for treatment by a hospital consultant rose to 19.6 weeks in July 2020.

Figures from August show that demand in emergency departments increased for the fourth consecutive month, when 32 150 patients waited more than four hours on a trolley bed, up from 20 928 in July.²

Chaand Nagpaul, chair of the BMA council, said that the government needed to invest immediately in the NHS, “with clear plans of expanding NHS infrastructure and capacity to cope with the demand of both covid and non-covid patients.”

He added, “Equally important is that the government must urgently do everything it can to prevent the escalating spread of coronavirus. Given limited capacity in the NHS, surges in cases coupled with winter pressures will make it difficult to resume normal services.

“At worst, a second spike will overwhelm our already battered NHS and add insult to injury by generating a further, potentially uncontrollable, backlog.”

Restoring services

Neil Mortensen, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, said that he was disappointed to see waiting lists having increased in July, two months after the NHS had published a road map to restoring routine care.³

He added, “We urgently need to build up our hospital reserves if we are to see this winter through. Flu, together with continuing local covid-19 outbreaks, must not bring surgery to a standstill again, or thousands more will suffer.”

Updated cancer statistics also showed that the proportion of people receiving their first cancer treatment within two months of using the national screening service remained very low in July, at 25.4%.⁴ Although this represented a doubling of the previous month’s figure of 12.9%, it was less than a third of the July 2019 equivalent (85.8%).

Sara Bainbridge, head of policy at Macmillan Cancer Support, said that these “delays could directly impact on many of these people’s chances of survival . . . causing huge amounts of distress to them and their loved ones.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said, “Thanks to the hard work and dedication of NHS staff, hospitals have not been overwhelmed during the pandemic. We are supporting the NHS to safely restore urgent and non-urgent services and it is vital all those who need medical care come forwards and seek help.

“We have announced an additional £3bn [€3.24bn; \$3.85bn] for winter preparations, committed £300m capital funding to upgrade A&Es to expand waiting areas and treatment cubicles. This is on top of a record cash funding boost of £33.9bn extra by 2023-24 for the NHS.”

1 NHS England. Consultant-led referral to treatment waiting times data 2020-21. England level timeseries. 2020. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-waiting-times/rtt-data-2020-21/>.

2 NHS England. A&E attendances and emergency admissions 2020-21. Adjusted: monthly A&E time series August 2020. 2020. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/ae-waiting-times-and-activity/ae-attendances-and-emergency-admissions-2020-21/>.

3 NHS England. NHS roadmap to safely bring back routine operations. 14 May 2020. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/05/nhs-roadmap/>.

4 NHS England. Cancer waiting times. national time series Oct 2009-July 2020 with revisions. 2020. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/cancer-waiting-times/>.

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