



Ministry of Health Service Purchasing Unit in the Gaza Strip © WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 5
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Summary: May 2017

Further deteriorating access for Gaza patients needing referral for health care outside Gaza

- **Marked drop in number of referral decisions by the Ministry of Health for Gaza patients:** the lowest in 30 months and 28% lower than the monthly average for 2016
- **52-year-old cancer patient died awaiting an Israeli permit to access health care (see page 5)**
- **Orthopaedic patient arrested at Erez when exiting Gaza for medical treatment (see page 5)**
- **Woman accompanying patient arrested by Israeli security at Erez crossing when returning to Gaza (see page 5)**
- **More than half of patients denied/delayed permits:** Of 2,282 patient applications for a permit to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in May 2017 1,077 (47.2%) were approved, 47 (2.1%) were denied, and 1,158 (50.7%) were delayed with no response by the time of the patient's hospital appointment. Among those delayed were 255 children under the age of 18 years and 141 people aged 60 years or older (Palestinian Health Liaison and Coordination Office in Gaza).
- **Three in every five patient companions denied/delayed permits:** The approval rate of permit applications for patient companions was 39%. 2% of companions were denied permits and the remaining 59% still had their application pending by the time of the patient's scheduled hospital appointment date.
- **Security interrogation of patients:** 21 patients (16 males; 5 females), were requested for interview by the General Security Services at Erez during May. None was approved a permit to travel for health care.
- **No access to Egypt:** Rafah terminal opened only four days to allow return of Gaza people stranded in Egypt. 3,068 people and the bodies of two deceased patients returned to Gaza.
- **Ban on security interviews removed for patients only:** Gaza de facto authority partially removed a previous ban on interviews with Israeli security.
- **New Israeli restrictions on Gaza patient applications came into effect on 7th May 2017**

Table 1: Humanitarian health workers access through Erez:

	Requests	Approved	Denied	Pending
WHO Jerusalem staff to enter Gaza	3	2	1	0
WHO Gaza staff to exit Gaza	3	0	0	3
Health Cluster partners	0	0	0	0
International medical delegates	6	6	0	0
Total	12	8	1	3

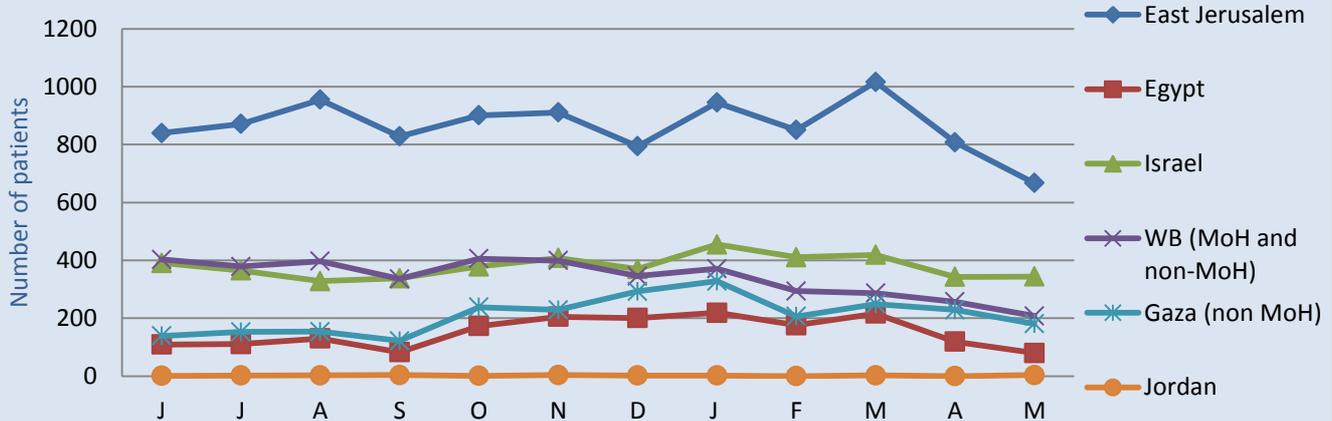
Ministry of Health referrals

Referrals and financial coverage: In May, the Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,484 referral decisions, the lowest number of referrals for Gaza patients since January 2015 (1,481) and 28% lower than the monthly average for 2016. There were 1,317 referrals for Gaza patients (48% female patients and 52% male patients) for outside care, with an estimated cost of NIS 6,977,767. Approximately a quarter (27%) of referrals were for children under 18 and a quarter (24%) were for elderly people over 60 years old. The most common specialties for referral were for cancer treatment and investigation (almost a third); heart catheterization for ischaemic heart disease (a tenth) and haematology (a tenth), see **Table 2**.

Table 2: Ministry of Health referrals in April 2017*

Medical Referral	Patients	Percentage	Medical Referral	Patients	Percentage
Oncology	433	29.2%	Cardiology	50	3.4%
Heart catheterization	154	10.4%	Ophthalmology	49	3.3%
Haematology	150	10.1%	Internal medicine	46	3.1%
Orthopaedics	91	6.1%	Neurosurgery	43	2.9%
Paediatrics	77	5.2%	19 other specialties	317	21.4%
Nuclear medicine	74	5.0%	* N = 1,484		

Chart 1: 12 months trends of referrals of Gaza patients, June 2016 - May 2017 (referral numbers)



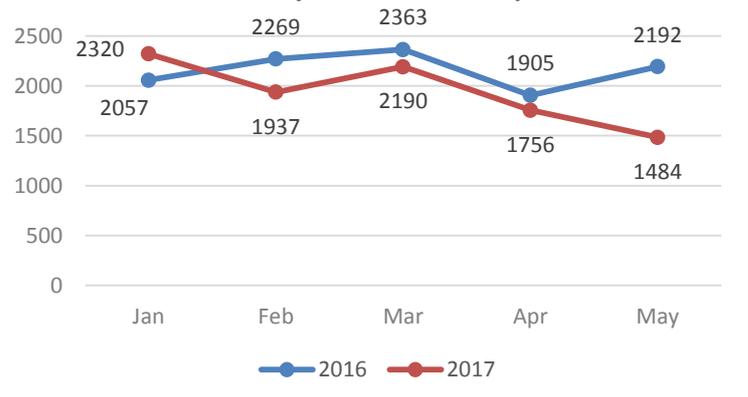
Over four-fifths of referrals (1,223 out of 1,484) were to hospitals in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Israel or Jordan, requiring Israeli permits for access via Erez checkpoint. Around one in twenty referrals (80 in total) were to Egypt, requiring approval from Egypt for exit through Rafah and access to the Rafah border. The remaining one in eight referrals (181 in total) were to non-MoH medical facilities within Gaza, see **Chart 1**.

Patient referral crisis

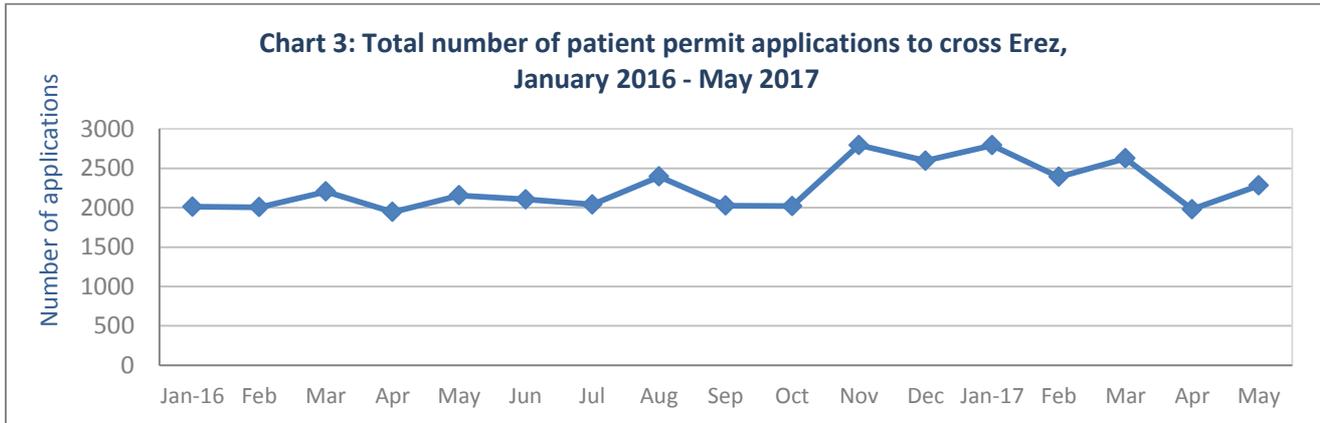
In May 2017, procedural delays led to a decline in the number of financial coverage documents for Gaza patients issued by the Service Purchasing Unit (SPU). There was a decline by around a quarter (27%) when compared to the average number of financial coverage approvals issued in 2016, see **Chart 2**. 1,484 financial coverage documents were issued for 1,317 patients, and of these 1,303 were for referrals outside of Gaza.

Previously, more than 95% of patient referral applications were approved by the medical committees of the SPU offices in Gaza and Ramallah and received financial coverage from the central SPU in Ramallah. More than 75% were issued financial coverage within seven days of submitting an application.

Chart 2: Comparison of Gaza patients monthly referrals, Jan-May 2017 with same period 2016

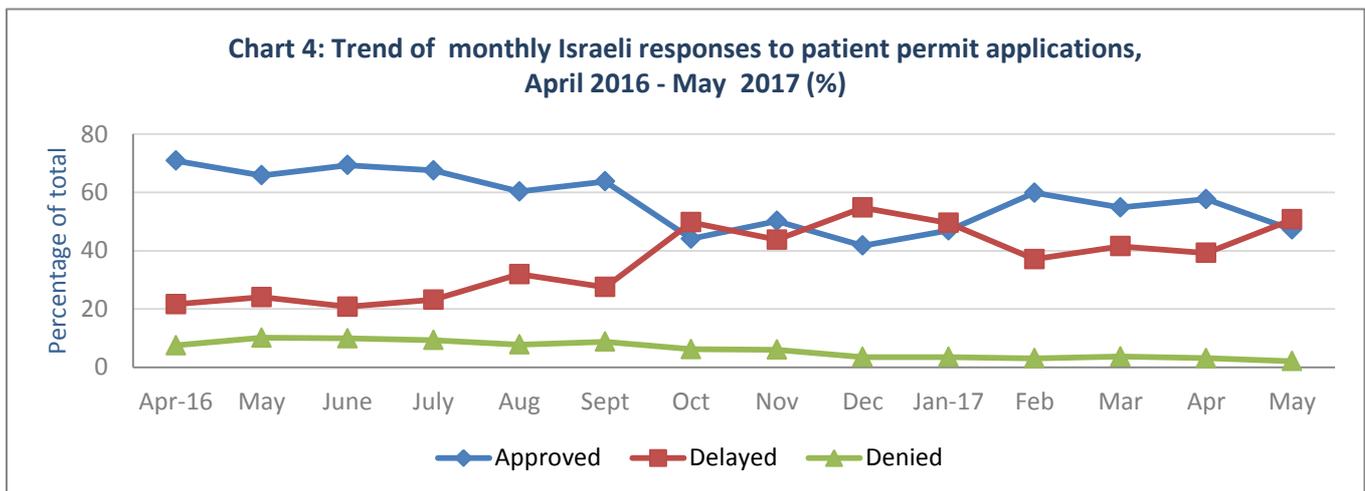


Drop in permit approval rates to cross Erez: In May there were 2,282 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care, see **Chart 3**. A fifth of patient exit permit requests (504) in May were repeat attempts: 228 patients made two applications and 16 patients made three applications to exit for health care. The remaining four-fifths of applications (1,778) represented single attempts by patients during the month.



In May, three in every five permit applications to cross Erez were for access to hospitals in East Jerusalem: 602 referrals (over a quarter of the total number of 2,282 permit applications) were to Augusta Victoria Hospital, a main destination for cancer patients; 587 (over a quarter) to Makassed Hospital; 102 (4.5%) to St John Ophthalmic Hospital; and 57 (2.5%) to St Joseph Hospital. Of the remainder, the majority of permit applications to cross Erez were for access to hospitals in Israel (22%) and the West Bank (18.5%). In Israel, there were 159 referrals (7% of the total) to Hadassah; 123 (5%) to Tel-Hashomer; 68 (3%) to Ichilov Hospital; and 55 (2%) to Assuta hospital. In the West Bank, there were 182 (8%) to Najah University Hospital in Nablus and 44 (2%) to Nablus Specialty Hospital. The remaining 297 referrals (13% of the total) were to 27 other hospitals and medical centers.

In May, the Palestinian Health Liaison and Coordination Office reported that just under half or 47.2% (1,077) of applications for patient permits were approved, a drop of approximately 15% compared to the average for 2016 (62%), see **Chart 4**. Of those not approved, 47 applicants (2.1%) were denied access and 1,158 (50.7%) applications were pending at the time of the patient’s hospital appointments, meaning that patients lost the appointments and their medical care was delayed. 21 patients were requested for Israeli security interviews.



Of the 2,282 patients applying for permits to cross Erez, 95.2% received referrals from the Ministry of Health, 2.5% were self-funded, and 1.7% were supported by Noor Ala Al-alam charity and the remaining 0.6% by other organizations.

Denied care:

47 patients (31 males; 16 females) were denied permits to access health care through Erez, including five children under the age of 18 years and five patients aged 60 years or older. 25 had appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 11 in hospitals in the West Bank and 11 in Israeli hospitals. The following specialties were needed by patients who were denied permits: orthopedics (10); oncology (9); neurosurgery (7); nuclear medicine, cardiology, general surgery,

hematology (each 3); internal medicine and pediatrics (each 2); and one each for plastic surgery, vascular surgery, ophthalmology, intensive care, and gynecology.

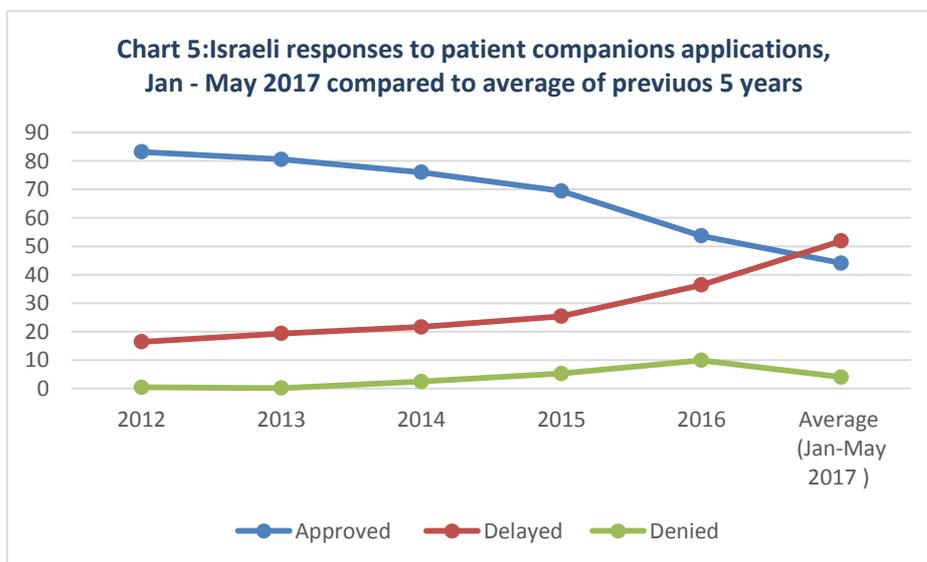
Delayed care: 1,158 patients (623 males; 535 females) experienced delays in accessing health care in May, among them 255 children aged 18 years or younger and 141 patients aged 60 years or older. Those delayed received no response to their applications and consequently lost their scheduled hospital appointments. The delayed patients (1,158) had treatment appointments in: oncology (309), orthopedics (110), cardiology (101), pediatrics (93), hematology (89), ophthalmology (73), neurosurgery (58), internal medicine (52), general surgery (49), nuclear medicine (38), vascular surgery (32), nephrology (29), urology (24), gynecology (21), ENT (21) and the remaining 59 were for 13 other specialties.

According to new Israeli guidelines effective from 7th May 2017, patients are required to submit their applications at least 20 working days prior to the date of their hospital appointment. The guidance was previously for ten working days prior to the patient's hospital appointment. In May, out of the 1,158 delayed patients, more than 90% submitted their applications in the categories of '8-14 days prior to the appointment date' or longer, with over 60% submitting applications 15 days or more prior to their hospital appointment date.

Security interviews: 21 patients (16 males; 5 females) were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Of these, none was approved. There has been an overall increase in the number of patients requested for GSS since December 2015.

Patient companions:

In May, 2,568 applications for permits to cross Erez for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany a Gaza patient and permits are conditional on security clearance for all men under the age of 55 years and women under 45 years. Approval rates for patient companions have declined steadily from 2012 to December 2016, when it was the lowest ever (35%). The situation slightly improved in February but declined again in March 2017. In May, only 38.7% were approved, 2.5% were denied and 58.9% were still under process on the date of the patient's medical appointment. Since 2012, there has been a steady decline in the approval rate for patient companions, see **Chart 5**.



Patients and companions cross Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 930 Gaza patients and 853 companions crossed Erez in May to access Palestinian, Israeli, or Jordanian hospitals. Of these, back-to-back ambulances transferred 69 patients, with 68 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 25 days for daytime working hours and closed on six days (four Saturdays and two Jewish holidays).

Rafah crossing – no access to Egypt

According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was closed for exit for the second month. During April and May the terminal was closed for exit, including for patients. The terminal was open for return for only four days in May, allowing 3,068 Gaza residents stranded in Egypt to return. The bodies of two patients who died while being treated in Egypt were also returned to Gaza during this time period. The Egyptian authorities allowed the entry of one truckload of drugs for the first time in 2017. The drugs were purchased in Egypt by the Gaza MoH. No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during the month. Since the beginning of 2017, the terminal was open for only 10 days allowing 1,200 patients to exit for medical treatment. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons.

De facto authority removed restrictions on patients requested by Israel for security interview.

In May, the de facto authority made exceptions to allow patients applying for Israeli permits to exit Gaza for health reasons to attend for security interviews with Israeli authorities. The de facto authority had previously taken a decision in April 2017 to ban attendance at interviews with the Israeli General Security Service (GSS). Monthly data from the Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs (PGACA) shows that 59 people registered to attend security interviews with Israeli authorities. The Israeli authorities sometimes request people who apply for permits to cross Erez, including patients and their companions, for interview as a pre-requisite for permit processing.

The April report of PGACA on people's movement through 5/5 checkpoint showed that nobody registered for interview with Israeli security services after 5th April 2017. Patients who had appointments for Israeli security services between the 6th April and 30th April were returned to Gaza by the de facto authority, which delayed their application processing by Israeli security services and their access to health care. In the first week of April, before the ban, 22 people attended for security interview.

The PGACA reports show a monthly average of 125 people registered as going for GSS interview in the first three months of this year.

New Israeli guidelines for permit applications and security clearance

New guidelines issued by Israeli authorities to the Palestinian Liaison and Coordination Office in Gaza require patients to submit applications 20 business days prior to their hospital appointment. The same instructions state that both security clearance and denial are valid for six months. According to the previous understanding between the Palestinian and Israeli Liaison and Coordination Offices, patients were required to submit applications at least 10 business days prior to their hospital appointment. The period of clearance was previously 3 months.

52-year-old patient dies while awaiting a permit to exit Gaza for health care

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza reported the death of **Tala'at Ash-Shawi**, a 52-year-old man from Rafah diagnosed with kidney cancer at Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) in May 2016 after he was referred for the first time from Gaza. He subsequently received four more permits and attended for treatment, but his cancer spread, resulting in paralysis of his legs. Tala'at's last permit approval to access AVH was on 18th August 2016. Tala'at applied for a permit on 28th September 2016 and Israeli security services requested him to attend for interview. He waited for an appointment for security interview but this reportedly never came. He applied again on 1st February 2017 and 15th March 2017 to continue his treatment at AVH, but his applications were pending on the Israeli side at the time of his hospital appointments and so he lost these appointments. Tala'at's health steadily deteriorated and he died on 28th May 2017.

Patient arrested at Erez

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza reported that **Alaa' Thabet**, a 33-year-old man and father of five children from the city of Deir-Al-Balah in the Gaza Strip, was detained at Erez by Israeli security services on his way to Nablus Specialty Hospital in the West Bank on Thursday 11th May 2017. Alaa' was due to attend for treatment of his left knee and was accompanied by his mother Amna, 62 years old. Alaa' was arrested at Erez terminal and transferred to Ashkelon prison. His mother was requested to return to Gaza. Alaa' was released from prison and returned to Gaza on Thursday 1st June 2017 after 20 days of detention.

A patient companion arrested

Ne'ama Al-Jourani, a 52-year-old woman from Khan Yunis, was arrested at Erez when returning to Gaza on Wednesday 3rd May 2017. Ne'ama had accompanied her nephew, Yousef Al-Mughrabi to Makassed Hospital after his mother was denied a permit as a companion. Yousef had suffered multiple fractures of his vertebral column and pelvis following a work accident and had been transferred to Makassed hospital on 4th April 2017. On the day of arrest the patient was allowed to return to Gaza. Ne'ama was released without charge on 16th May 2017, 12 days after her arrest.