Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip
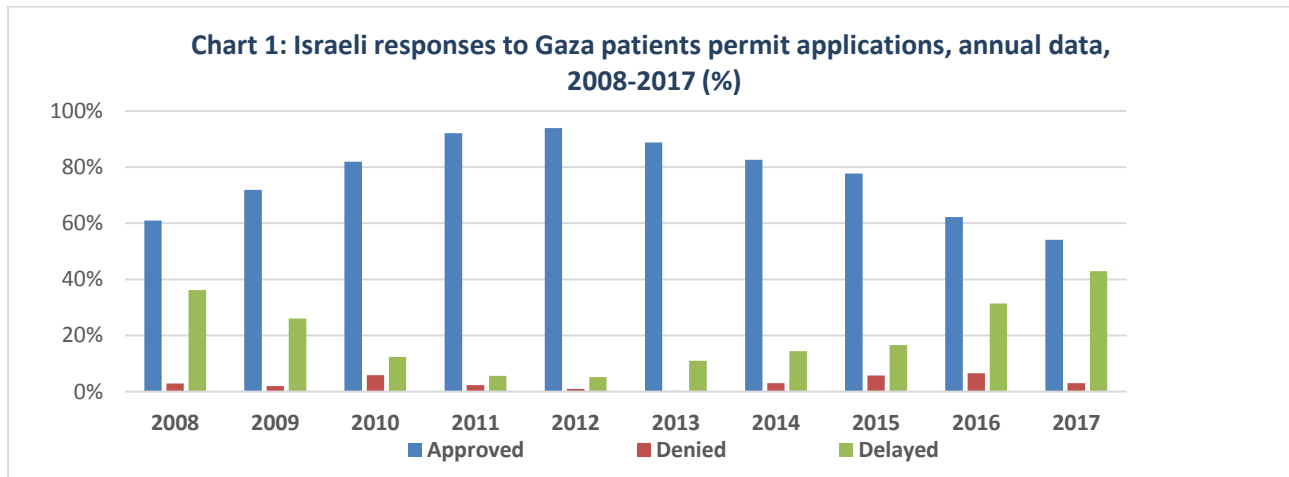
Summary: Annual overview and December 2017

- **2017 the lowest rate for approvals since WHO began active monitoring in 2008:** 54% of patient applications to exit Gaza via Erez were successful. There has been a continuous decline in approval rates since 2012, when approximately 93% of patient applications were successful.

- **54 patients died while awaiting security approval for referrals out of Gaza:** Approximately 85% of the patients who died while awaiting security permits had been referred for cancer investigations or treatment.

- **In December, 48% of patients unsuccessful in obtaining security permits from Israeli authorities:** From 2,170 patient applications **52.4%** were approved; **2.6%** denied; and **45.0%** delayed, receiving no definitive response from Israeli authorities by the date of hospital appointment.

- **Three in five patient companions unsuccessful in obtaining permits to travel out of Gaza:** There were 2,507 permit applications for patient companions submitted to Israeli authorities in December. **40.5%** were approved, **3.6%** were denied and **55.9%** were delayed, still pending by the date of the patient's hospital appointment.

- **Security interrogation of patients:** 11 patients (7 males; 4 females) were requested for interrogation by Israeli General Security Services at Erez during December. Five were approved permits to travel for health care.

- **Financial coverage for health care:** 1,784 requests for financial coverage for Gaza patients were approved by the Services Purchasing Unit of the Palestinian Ministry of Health in December 2017.

- **Limited access to Egypt:** Rafah terminal was open for four days in both directions. 183 patients exited Gaza to seek medical care. No medical aid and no medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during the month.

Access via Erez

2017 marked ten years of blockade of the Gaza Strip. Gaza patients must apply to Israeli security services to access health care outside the Strip. The approval rate of **54% for 2017 is the lowest on record** since 2008, when WHO began active monitoring of health access out of Erez checkpoint for Gaza patients, see **Chart 1**.

Chart 1: Israeli responses to Gaza patients permit applications, annual data, 2008-2017 (%)

Of the 25,511 applications to exit via Erez for health care in 2017, almost one third (31%) sought investigations or treatment for cancer. Other main reasons for referral included treatment for children (paediatrics 9%); heart problems (cardiology 9%) and blood disorders (haematology 9%). The majority of patients were referred to the main referral hospitals in East Jerusalem (58%), with the remainder to Israel (23%) and the West Bank (19%).

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Access via Rafah

6% of patient referrals by the Ministry of Health in Gaza were to health care facilities in Egypt, requiring exit via Rafah. Access out of Gaza via Rafah remained limited in 2017, restricted to humanitarian cases, including patients seeking health care in Egypt. The terminal was open for only 21 days in 2017, compared to 38 days in 2016 and 24 days in 2015. Of 16,795 people exiting via Rafah terminal in 2017, 1,405 were patients and 61 of these were transferred by ambulance. One medical shipment, a truckload of drugs and medical disposables purchased for the MoH in Gaza from Egypt, entered through the terminal. No medical delegates entered or exited through the terminal. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt each month for health-related reasons.

Beginning of November 2017 the terminal control and management was handed over to the Palestinian Authority by the de-facto authority in Gaza as part of the reconciliation process.

Access for humanitarian health staff- Gaza

In 2017, WHO submitted 222 applications to Israeli authorities for health workers to exit or enter Gaza for humanitarian purposes. The overall approval rate was 61%. Health workers are exempted from the general travel ban placed on Palestinians in Gaza, allowing health staff to apply for permits to exit the Strip. Staff from Gaza (WHO and health cluster partners) applying to exit the Strip were substantially less likely to be granted permission than humanitarian health staff attempting to enter (WHO and international medical delegates), with a 40% success rate versus 81% respectively. Ministry of Health and health cluster partners from Gaza were the least likely to be granted permits to travel with a success rate of 33%, while international medical delegates applying to enter Gaza had the highest application success rate of 88%, see **Table 1.**

Table 1: Status of health staff permit applications through the WHO system in the day of travel for the year 2017				
Jan -Dec 2017	**Approved**	**Denied**	**Pending**	**Total Number**
Out of Gaza: WHO staff	55%	13%	32%	47
Out of Gaza: MoH, health cluster partners	33%	1%	66%	107
Into Gaza: WHO staff (Jerusalem ID-holder)	68%	28%	4%	25
Into Gaza: International medical delegates	88%	7%	5%	43
Total	**52%**	**8%**	**40%**	**222**
Average approval	**61%**	**12%**	**27%**	

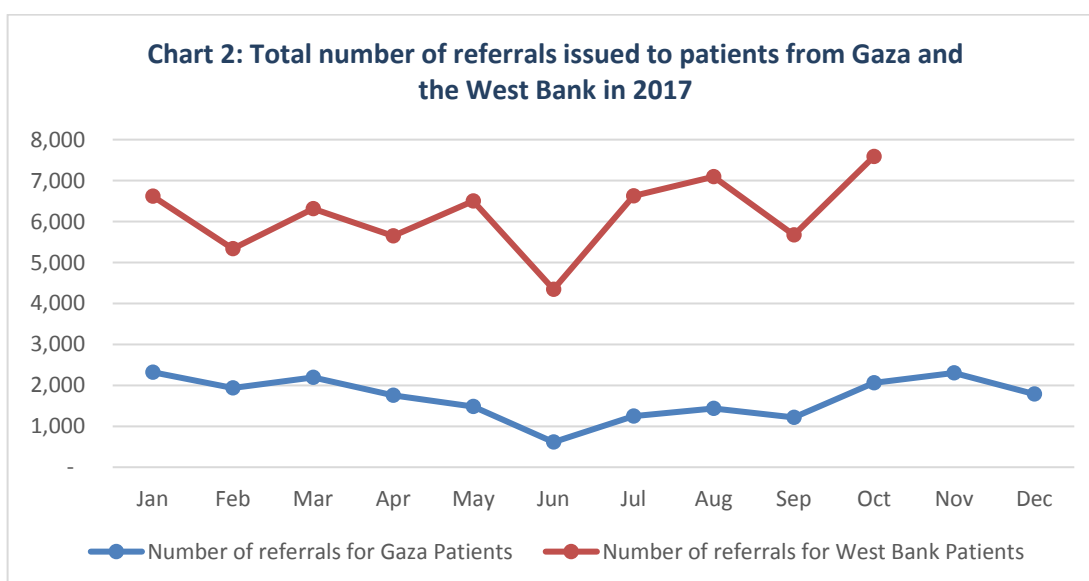### Access for humanitarian health staff- East Jerusalem

Health staff working in East Jerusalem hospitals and living in the West Bank or Gaza require permits from the Israeli authorities in order to access their work place in Jerusalem. The six East Jerusalem hospitals submitted 1,708 permit applications for health staff from the West Bank and Gaza to the Israeli authorities in 2017. 93.6% of these applications were approved for 6 months period, 4.9% were approved for 3 months period and 1.5% (26 staff members) were denied access.

Security interrogations

In 2017, the Israeli authorities requested 603 (Male: 392; Female: 211) patients for security interviews as a condition to process their permit applications. After interrogation, 72 (12%) patients were approved permits, 11 (2%) were denied and the remaining 520 (86%) were pending by the time of hospital appointment.

Part 2: December referrals by the Ministry of Health

1,784 financial coverage documents were issued to Gaza patients in December. Referrals out of Gaza were to East Jerusalem hospitals (34%), Israel (17%), the West Bank (16%) and Egypt (4%), and 29% of referrals were to non-MoH hospitals inside the Gaza Strip. There were 6,486 financial coverage documents issued to patients from the West Bank in December. Of these referrals, 45% were to non-MoH facilities in the West Bank, 39% to East Jerusalem and 17% to Israeli hospitals. **Chart 3** shows the number of referral documents issued to patients in Gaza and the West Bank from January to December 2017.

Chart 2: Total number of referrals issued to patients from Gaza and the West Bank in 2017

Part 3: December access and security interrogations

Of 2,170 applications to cross Erez for health care in December, approximately one in three (29%) were for children under age of 18, one in five (18%) for patients over age of 60, almost half (49%) were for female patients; 94% of applications were for medical care funded by the Palestinian Ministry of Health. (60%) of applications to cross Erez were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals; (22%) to Israeli hospitals; and (18%) to hospitals in the West Bank. The top five specialties accounted for approximately two thirds (65%) of all referrals, with oncology accounting for one third (32%), paediatrics 10%, cardiology 9%, haematology 9% and neurosurgery 5%.

Approved permit applications: 1,137 (M: 559; F: 578) or just over half (52.4%) of the 2,170 applications to cross Erez in December 2017 were approved. Of those approved 38% were children under age of 18 and 25% were elderly people over age of 60 years.

Denied care: 56 patient applications (27 male; 29 female), or 2.6% of the total, were denied permission to cross Erez for health care in December, including seven children under age of 18 years and seven patients aged 60 years or older.

Delayed care: 977 patient applications (520 male; 457 female), or 45% of the total, were delayed, among them 193 applications for children under the age of 18 and 100 applications for patients aged 60 years or older. Patients who are delayed received no definitive acceptance or rejection to travel for health care by the time of their hospital appointment, resulting in loss of appointments and delays to care.

Security interrogation: 11 adult patients (7 male; 4 female), were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Five of these patients were referred for cancer treatment or investigations. After interrogation, five patients were approved and six remained pending.

Patient companions: There were 2,507 applications to Israeli authorities by relatives for permits to cross Erez with patients. These include parents or other companions applying to accompany children. Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany a Gaza patient and permits are conditional to security clearance. In December, 1,016 (40.5%) patient companion applications were approved; 91 (3.6%) were denied and 1,400 (55.9%) were pending by the date of the patient's medical appointment.

Patients and companions crossing Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,005 Gaza patients and 895 companions crossed Erez in December to access Palestinian or Israeli hospitals. 69 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulances, with 65 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 26 days for daytime working hours and closed on five days (five Saturdays).

Rafah crossing – Egypt

The Rafah border terminal was open in both directions for four days during the month of December, allowing 2,492 people to exit Gaza, including 183 for health reasons. Three were transferred by ambulance. No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during the month.