



Special Purchasing Unit peripheral office in the Gaza Strip © WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: Nine
(Published 26 Oct 2017)

Summary: September 2017

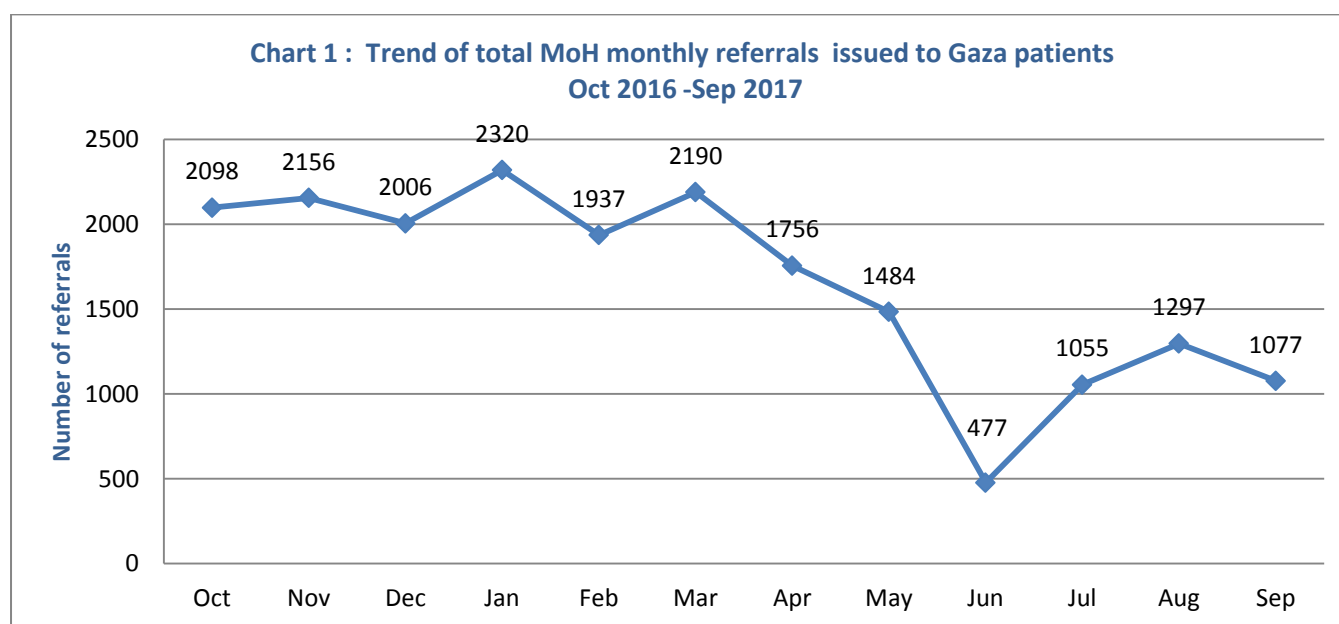
- **More than 45% of patients unsuccessful in obtaining security permits from Israeli authorities:** Of 1,858 patient applications for a permit to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in September 2017, 55% were approved, 3% were denied, and 42% were delayed with no decision by the time of the patient's hospital appointment. Among those delayed there were 140 children under the age of 18 years and 99 people aged 60 years or older.
- **More than half of patient companions unsuccessful in obtaining permits to travel out of Gaza:** Of 2,104 permit applications for patient companions to Israeli authorities in September 2017, 43% were approved, 4% were denied and 53% were delayed, with their application still pending by the time of the patient's hospital appointment date.
- **Security interrogation of patients:** 24 patients (13 males; 11 females) were requested for interrogation by the General Security Services at Erez during September. Two were approved permits to travel for health care.
- **Persistent challenges for Gaza patients seeking financial coverage for health referrals:** 1,077 requests for financial coverage for Gaza patients were approved by the Services Purchasing Unit of the Palestinian Ministry of Health in September. This is 50% lower than the monthly average of the first quarter 2017 and 37% lower than the corresponding month in 2016.
- **No access to Egypt:** Rafah terminal was closed for exit. No medical aid and no medical delegates entered Gaza.
- **Humanitarian workers access through Erez:** Latest figures indicate that more than four in every five humanitarian workers in Gaza unsuccessful in securing permits to exit the Strip
- **A 27 year-old orthopedic patient arrested at Erez**

Part 1: Referrals

Ministry of Health referrals

Gaza patients requiring medical referral outside the Gaza Strip have been affected by procedural delays since mid-May, with a decline in the number and slowing of the process for issuing financial coverage documents for Gaza patients by the Service Purchasing Unit (SPU).

In September, 1,077 referral documents were issued for Gaza patients. This number is 50% of the monthly average in the first quarter of 2017 before the crisis (2,149) and 37% lower compared to the corresponding month of 2016 (1,711). This represents a decline in the number of referral documents for Gaza patients issued compared to the previous month. **Chart 1** shows a 12-month trend of the number of referral documents issued for Gaza patients from October 2016 to September 2017. Compared to the monthly average for the first quarter of 2017, the proportion of referrals to non-MoH health facilities inside Gaza had almost doubled, while the proportion of referrals to other destinations – East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Israel and Egypt – had slightly declined.



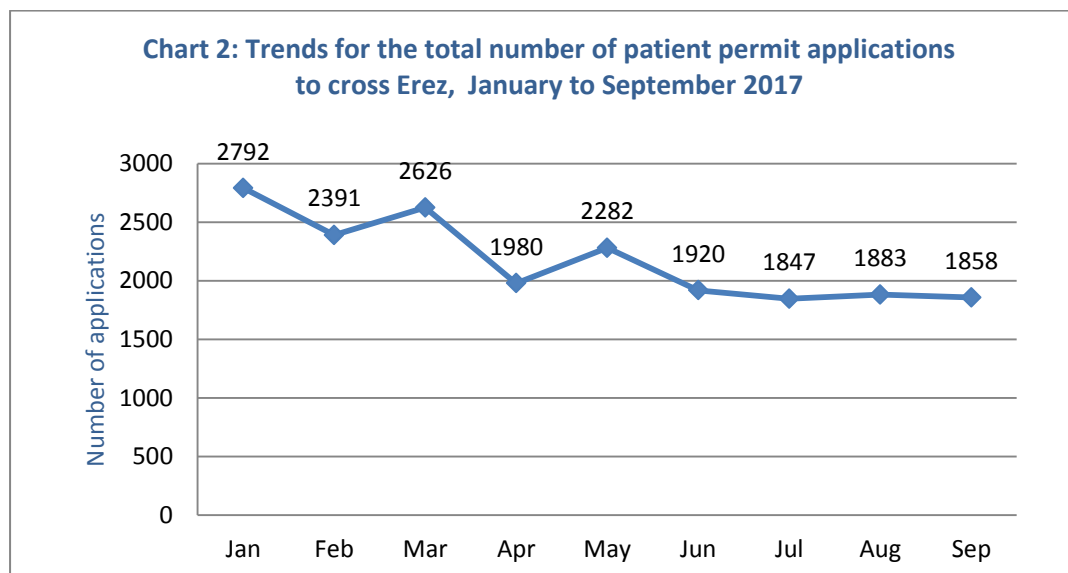
Processing time: Of patients accepted for referral from January to May 2017, 99% were approved by the SPU within seven days of submitting an application. In September 2017, 32% of applications were approved within one week, with more than two in every three applications taking longer than seven days to process, see **Table 1**.

Table 1: Processing time for medical referrals by the SPU September 2017	
Processing time (days)	Applications (%)
1-7	32
8-14	16
15-21	10
22-31	12
More than 31	30

Part 2: ACCESS

Israeli security permits and interrogations

Israeli permits for patients to cross Erez: There has been an overall decline in the number of applications to cross Erez for health care. In September 1,678 patients submitted 1,858 applications to cross Erez for seeking medical care, a decline of more than a quarter (29%) compared to the average for the first three months of 2017, see **Chart 2**.



1,019 or just over half (55%) of applications received security approval to travel to access health care. 60 applications (3%) were denied security approval to travel for health care and 779 applications (42%) were delayed, still pending at the time of the patient's hospital appointment.

Of the 1,858 patients applications, 27% were for children under 18 and 19% were for patients over 60 years old. 48% of applications were for female patients. 95% of applications were for medical care funded by the Ministry of Health. The top five specialties accounted for 65% of applications: oncology (33%), haematology (8%), cardiology (8%), orthopaedics (8%), and paediatrics (8%).

The majority (60%) of permit applications to cross Erez were for access to hospitals in East Jerusalem. 22% were for access to Israeli hospitals and 18% were for access to hospitals in the West Bank.

Denied care: 60 patient applications (43 male; 17 female), or 3% of the total, were denied permits to access health care through Erez in September, including four children under the age of 18 years and three patients aged 60 years or older.

Delayed care: 779 patient applications (425 males; 354 females), or 42% of the total, were delayed in September, among them 140 applications for children under the age of 18 and 99 applications for patients aged 60 years or older. Those delayed received no decision regarding their applications by the time of their appointments, losing their scheduled hospital appointments and delaying their access to care.

According to new Israeli guidelines effective from 7th May 2017, patients are required to submit non-urgent applications at least 20 working days prior to the date of their hospital appointment. This is a doubling of the previous guidance for patients to submit non-urgent applications ten working days prior to the hospital appointment.

Security interrogation: 24 patients (13 men and 11 women), one under 18 years of age and three over 60 years old, were called for security interrogation by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) in September. After interrogation, two patients were approved and 22 were pending.

Patient companions: In September, there were 2,104 applications to Israeli authorities for permits to cross Erez for relatives accompanying patients, including parents or other companions for children. Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany a Gaza patient and permits are conditional on security clearance for all men aged 16 to 55 years old and all women aged 16 to 45 years old. In September, 43% of applications were approved, 4% were denied and 53% received no answer by the date of the patient's medical appointment.

Patients and companions cross Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 867 Gaza patients and 762 companions crossed Erez in September to access Palestinian or Israeli hospitals. 81 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance, with 79 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 23 days for daytime working hours and closed on seven days (five Saturdays and two Jewish Holidays).

Rafah crossing – Egypt

The Rafah border terminal was closed for exit for the whole month of September and was exceptionally opened on five days for the return of pilgrims. No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during the month. Since the beginning of 2017, the terminal was open for exit only 16 days during the year, of which two days were for the exit of pilgrims only. Long periods of closure make Rafah terminal unreliable for patients seeking healthcare outside Gaza. So far in 2017, only 1,222 patients have exited via Rafah for medical treatment. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt each month for health-related reasons.

A patient arrested at Erez



Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza reported that Fadil Abu-Hasira, a 27-year-old patient from Gaza, was arrested at Erez crossing while on his way to Makassed Hospital in Jerusalem on the 10th September 2017. Fadil's father reported to Al-Mezan that Fadil had been referred to Makassed Hospital for orthopaedic care. He had applied three times for a permit to travel for appointments in June, July and August but each time was denied. His application at the end of August for an appointment on 10th September was then approved.

On the day of appointment, he arrived to Erez crossing in the morning accompanied by his mother. After about four hours waiting, Fadil was taken for an interview with the Israeli security officers. Later his mother was informed that Fadil had been arrested and that she should return to Gaza.

Humanitarian Health Access through Erez

2017 marks ten years of blockade of the Gaza Strip. In theory, humanitarian 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 for continuing professional development, coordination meetings, workshops and conferences. In practice, however, preliminary data from the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs shows that more than four in every five humanitarian workers (86%) are unsuccessful in obtaining a permit to exit Gaza, with a total of 2,834 humanitarian staff applying for permits to exit Gaza from January to September 2017.

Inability to exit the Gaza Strip limits the continuing professional development of health professionals in Gaza and poses a major barrier to the cohesiveness of the health system across the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. **Table 2** shows data collected by WHO on access for 166 humanitarian health staff from January to September 2017. Those applying to enter Gaza were substantially more likely to secure permits than those applying to exit (84% versus 43%). MoH and health cluster partners from Gaza were the least likely to secure permits to travel out of Gaza, with just over a third being approved (36%), while international delegates traveling to Gaza were most likely to be approved for travel – with around six in every seven delegates (85%) accepted to enter when applying through WHO.

**Table 2: Approvals for humanitarian health staff applying through WHO
January - September 2017**

Applicants	Percentage approved	Percentage denied	Percentage pending	Total number
Out of Gaza: WHO staff	53%	14%	33%	43
Out of Gaza: MoH, health cluster partners	36%	1%	62%	74
Into Gaza: WHO staff	80%	13%	7%	15
Into Gaza: International medical delegates	85%	9%	6%	34
Total	55%	7%	38%	166