



European Gaza Hospital outpatient waiting room. December 2015 ©WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 5 (June 30, 2016)

### Summary: May 2016

#### Erez crossing

- **1 in 3 patients denied or delayed Gaza exit:** Of 2,156 patient applications submitted for permits to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in May, 65.81% were approved. 219 patients (10.16%) were denied, including 19 children and 19 elderly persons over 60 years. 518 patients (24.03%) received no response to their applications, including 138 children and 53 elderly people over 60 (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **High number of patients for security interview:** 86 patients, among them 27 females, were requested for General Security Services interviews at Erez during May. One was approved. (page 6)
- **Companions hindered from obtaining permits:** Approval rates for patient companions' permit applications dropped to 55%. (page 5)
- **Patient returning to Gaza arrested at Erez.** (page 7)
- **Humanitarian health workers face limited access through at Erez.** (page 8)

#### Rafah exit

- **2-days access to Egypt during May:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open for 2 days during the month allowing 253 people who travelled for health reasons to cross to Egypt among them 18 patients transferred by ambulance. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza through Egypt during the month.

#### Ministry of Health Referrals in May

- Ministry of Health referred **2,192 patients** in May to outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 9,439,400**. The top 5 needed procedures for Gaza patients were in oncology, pediatrics, ophthalmology, MRI and orthopedics.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients<sup>1</sup>

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,192 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in May, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), 10% higher than the monthly average in 2015.

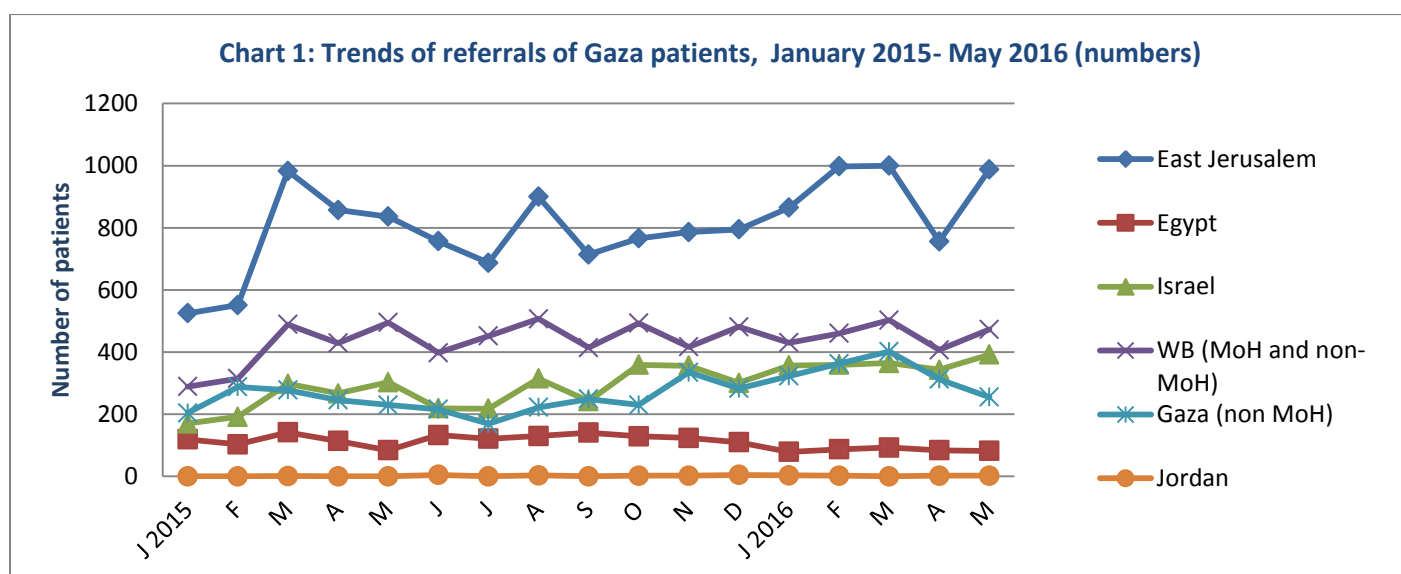
Referral Destination	2015 monthly average	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	Total 2016
Gaza (non-MoH)	251	323	363	402	313	255	1,656
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	477	430	460	503	407	473	2,273
East Jerusalem	809	865	998	1,000	756	988	4,607
Jordan	3	3	2	0	2	2	9
Israel	312	357	359	365	343	392	1,816
Egypt	139	79	84	93	84	82	425
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,991</b>	<b>2,057</b>	<b>2,269</b>	<b>2,363</b>	<b>1,905</b>	<b>2,192</b>	<b>10,786</b>

Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, June 7, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Most referrals (45.07%) were to East Jerusalem hospitals; the remaining were distributed to West Bank hospitals (21.58%), Israeli hospitals (17.88%) and within Gaza (11.63%). Referrals to Egypt (3.74%) remained low due to uncertainty of access.

Compared to April, referrals increased to all destinations, except Jordan and Egypt. Compared to the 2015 monthly average, referrals were higher to East Jerusalem hospitals by 22% and to Israel by 25.6% but 41% lower to Egypt. Referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza and to the West Bank and Jordan were similar to 2015 (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**).

46.03% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 53.97% were for males. 33.12% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18; 17.79% were for elderly patients over 60 years old.



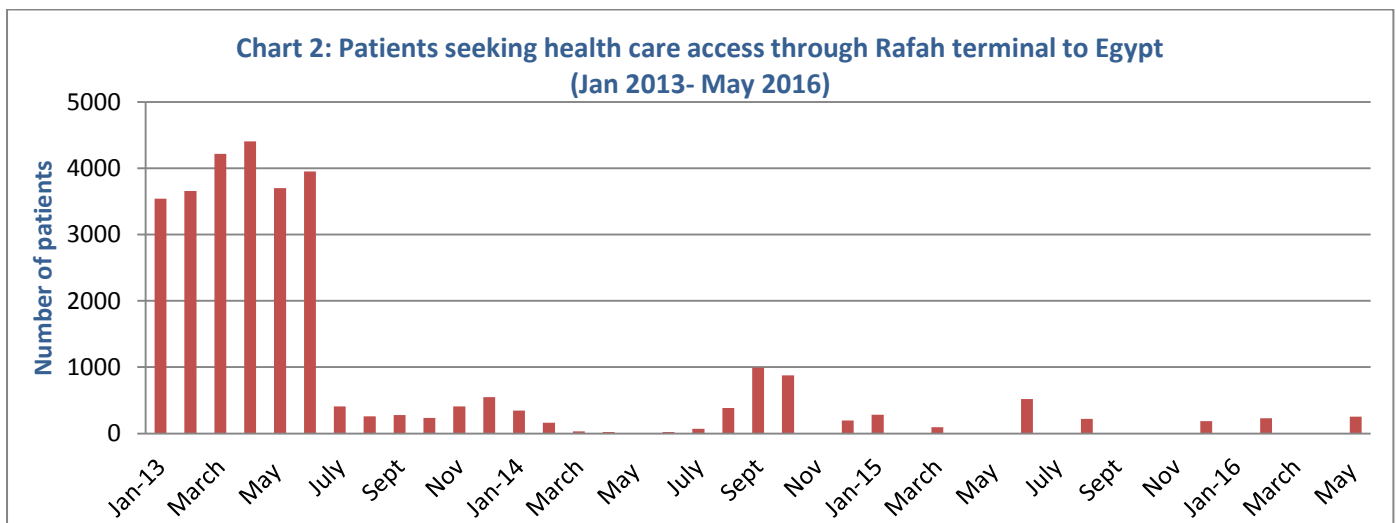
The specialties needed for Gaza referrals were mainly: oncology - 448 referrals (20.44%), pediatrics - 171 (7.8%), ophthalmology - 155 (7.07%), MRI - 153 (6.98%), orthopedics - 150 (6.84%), hematology - 138 (6.3%), nuclear medicine - 116 (5.29%), neurosurgery - 95 (4.33%), urology - 76 (3.47%), cardiology - 71 (3.24%). The remaining 619 (28.24%) were for 23 other specialties. The Referral Directorate in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of NIS 9,439,400 for the 2,192 referrals for Gaza patients in May.

<sup>1</sup> The referral data used in the WHO monthly reports since October 2015 is obtained from the Ministry of Health Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah and reflect the number of financial decisions for Gaza patients, rather than the number of actual patients. This data includes renewals of referrals for Gaza patients to Egypt who are still waiting for access through Rafah, approvals for additional financial coverage needed for in-patients in hospital, and special additional referrals.

## ACCESS

Of the 2,192 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in May, 1,855 (84.6%) required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 82 (3.74%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

**Limited access to Egypt during May:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open on 2 days during May allowing 727 travellers to exit to Egypt, of which 253 reported they were travelling for health reasons. 18 were transferred by ambulances with 18 companions. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month. In the first five months of 2016, the Rafah crossing was open only 5 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 481 patients (80 by ambulance) to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons (**Chart 2**).

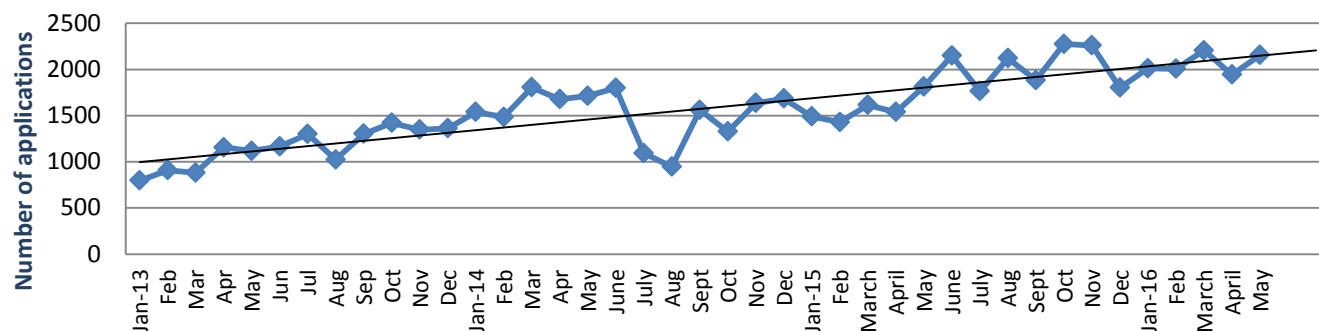


Source: Palestinian officials, Rafah terminal.

**Access through Erez crossing:** In May, there were 2,156 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (57.28% males and 42.72% females). 31.49% were applications for children under 18 years and 15.58% were for elderly people above 60. Permit applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in oncology, 449 (20.83%), orthopedics, 234 (10.85%), ophthalmology, 216 (10.02%), cardiology, 193 (8.95%), pediatrics, 190 (8.81%), hematology, 148 (6.86%), neurosurgery, 131 (6.08%), nuclear medicine, 99 (4.59%), general surgery, 71 (3.29%), urology 71 (3.29%). The remaining 354 (16.42%) applications were for 18 other specialties.

Of the total permit applications, 1,055 (48.93%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 596 (27.64%) to the West Bank, 496 (23%) to Israel, and 9 (0.42%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in May were Makassed, 607 (28.15%), Augusta Victoria, 292 (13.54%), Najah University in Nablus, 190 (8.81%), Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron, 154 (7.14%), Tel-Hashomir 142 (6.59%), St. John hospital, 116 (5.38%), Hadassah, 111 (5.15%), Msalam center, 106 (4.92%), Assuta, 64 (2.97%) and Ichilov in Tel-aviv, 55 (2.55%). The remaining 319 (14.8%) were to 27 other hospitals.

**Chart 3: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez, January 2013 - May 2016**



The total number of permit applications in May was 16.86% higher than the monthly average in 2015 (1,845). In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand for access to health care through Erez due to lack of resources in the health system in Gaza and blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients.



The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming for the patient and complicated, sometimes requiring multiple attempts which delays health care. The patient must have a valid financial commitment from the Palestinian MoH and documentation of an appointment from the receiving hospital. If the validity of either expires before the patient receives a permit, the application process must be repeated. Patients sometimes reapply after being denied a permit, or if the treatment is urgent and no response has been received. May data showed that out of the 2,156 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 208 (9.65%) patients had repeated attempts: 5 attempts for 1 patient, 4 attempts for 2 patients, 3 attempts for 12 patients and 2 attempts for 193 patients.

In May, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,419 (65.81%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), 10.85% lower than the monthly average in 2015 (76.66%). 219 applicants (10.16%) were denied access. 518 (24.03%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli district liaison office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date. In May, out of the total 2,156 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 233 (10.81%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 620 (28.76%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 1,244 (57.7%) were 15-30 days before, and 58 (2.69%) were more than 30 days before the hospital appointment. One application was not accounted for.

**Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, May 2016**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	78	148	60	128	2	4	16	16	0	0
4 - 17	186	267	142	192	6	7	38	68	1	1
18 - 40	261	300	154	139	34	66	73	95	16	29
41 - 60	249	331	163	177	26	55	60	99	10	27
Over 60	147	189	123	141	4	15	20	33	0	2
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>921</b>	<b>1235</b>	<b>642</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,156</b>		<b>1,419 (65.81%)</b>		<b>219 (10.16%)</b>		<b>518 (24.03%)</b>		<b>86 (3.99%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

**Table 3** shows that total patient permit applications in May 2016 were 19% higher than the corresponding month in 2015 while the approval rate was 18.48% lower. Denial rate was more than 4 times higher in May 2016 while

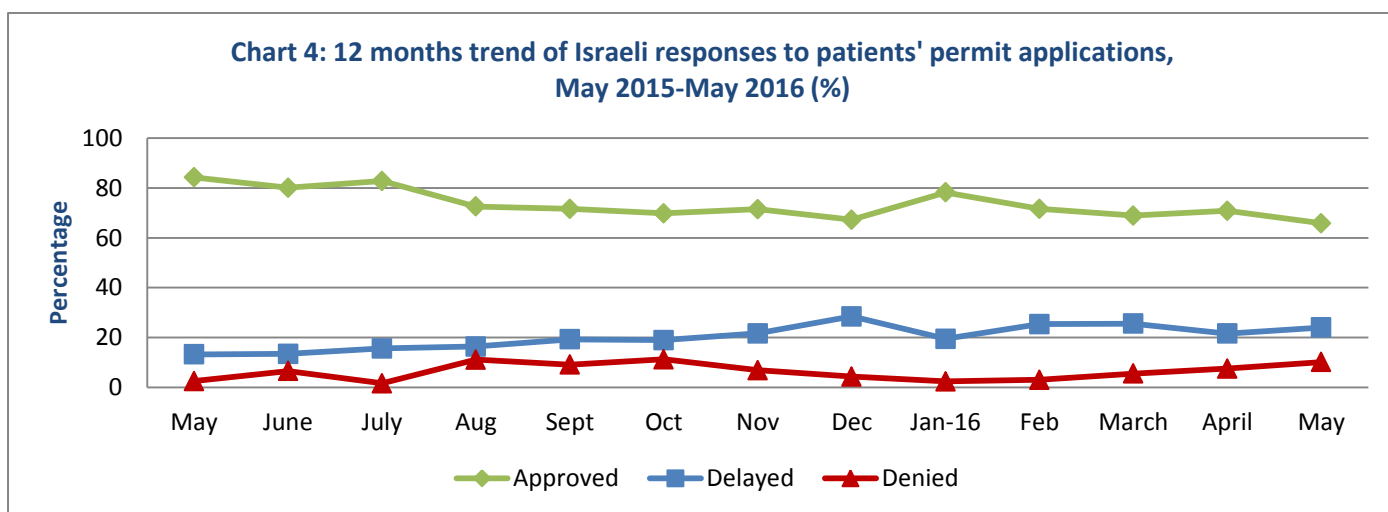
delayed rate was 10.8% higher. The total number of permit applications in the period January- May 2016 was 31% higher than the corresponding period in 2015 but the approval rate was 11.27% lower. The number of patients requested for security interview in the same period was more than 5 folds higher.

**Table 3: Israeli District Liaison Office decisions on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, and sex of applicant, 2016 compared to 2015**

Period	May 2015		May 2016		January -May 2015		January-May 2016	
	Total	1,814 (F:873; M:941)		2,156 (F:921; M:1,235)		7,886 (F:3,662; M:4,224)		10,322 (F:4,846;M:5,476)
Approved	1,529 (F:768; M:761)	84.29%	1,419 (F:642; M:777)	65.81%	6,486 (F:3,158; M:3,328)	82.25%	7,326 (F:3,650;M:3,676)	70.98%
Denied	45 (F:6; M:39)	2.48%	219 (F:72; M:147)	10.16%	205 (F:37; M:168)	2.6%	594 (F:187;M:407)	5.75%
Delayed	240 (F:99; M:141)	13.23%	518 (F:207; M:311)	24.03%	1,195 (F:467; M:728)	15.15%	2,402 (F:1,009;M:1,393)	23.27%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	20 (F:5;M:15)	1.1%	86 (F:27; M:59)	3.99%	88 (F:24; M:64)	1.12%	457 (F:160;M:297)	4.43%

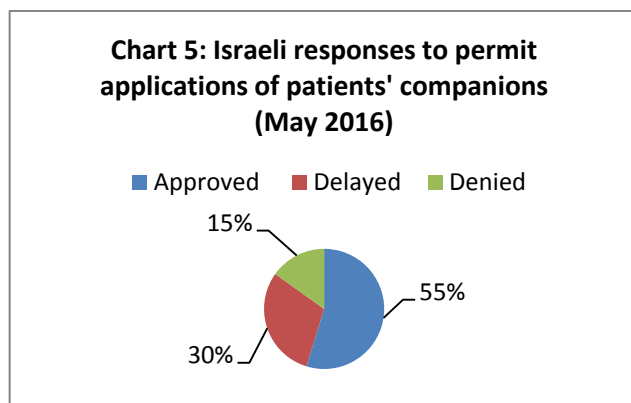
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Chart 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays. Delays were higher in 2016 compared to the 2015 average, possibly due to an increase in GSS requests for security interviews. The approval rate (65.81%) in May was the lowest since July 2014 when it was 65. 51% during the military conflict which reflects an increased Israeli restrictions on access in the recent months.



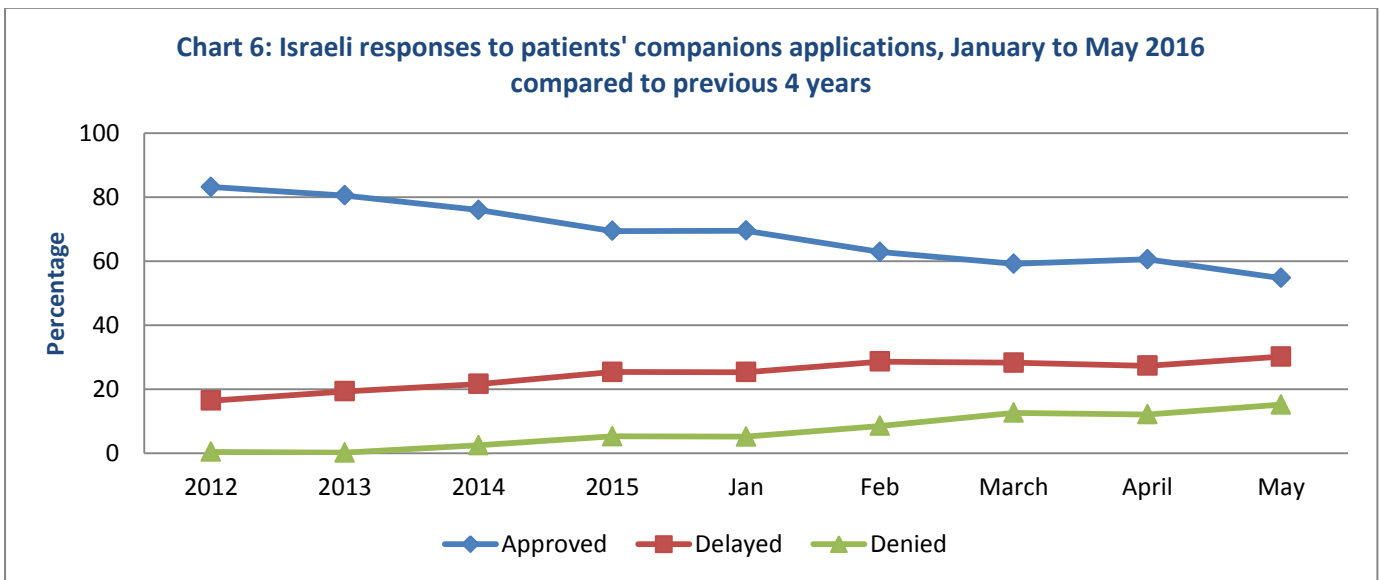
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Patients' companions:** In May, 2,320 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 54.74% were approved, almost 15% lower than the average for 2015; 15.13% were denied and 30.13% were delayed and pending (**Chart 5**). Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany patients and permits are now conditional on security clearance for those 55 years of age and younger. **Chart 6** shows a steady decline in the approval rates for patients' companions from January 2012 to May 2016, due to increases in denials and delays in responses to companions' applications.





**Chart 6: Israeli responses to patients' companions applications, January to May 2016 compared to previous 4 years**



**Financial coverage:** 93% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in May were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 3.48% were self-funded, and 1.25% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 1.21% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 0.74% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.09% by Doctors Without Borders, 0.09% by the Military Medical Services, 0.05% by UNRWA and 0.09% by other organizations.

**Denied care:** 219 patients (147 males; 72 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 19 children and 19 patients over 60 years old. May represented the highest number of patients denied in one month since October 2015 when 255 patients were denied. Of the denied patients, 186 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 32 in Israel and 1 in Jordan. 208 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 9 were self-funded, 1 by the Doctors Without Borders, and 1 by Peres Peace Center. Of those denied: 2 (0.91%) submitted their applications less than 7 days before the appointment but 19.63% (43) had waited for a response for 8-14 days; 75.34% (165) waited 15-30 days; and 9 (4.11%) patients waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for: orthopedics (63); oncology (31); neurosurgery (28); ophthalmology (14); urology (12); general surgery (11); cardiology (9); ENT and nuclear medicine (8) each; internal medicine (7); obstetrics/gynecology (5); endocrinology and pediatrics (4) each; hematology and vascular surgery (3) each; dermatology and neurology (2) each; maxillofacial surgery, nephrology, plastic surgery, rehabilitation and infertility (1) each.

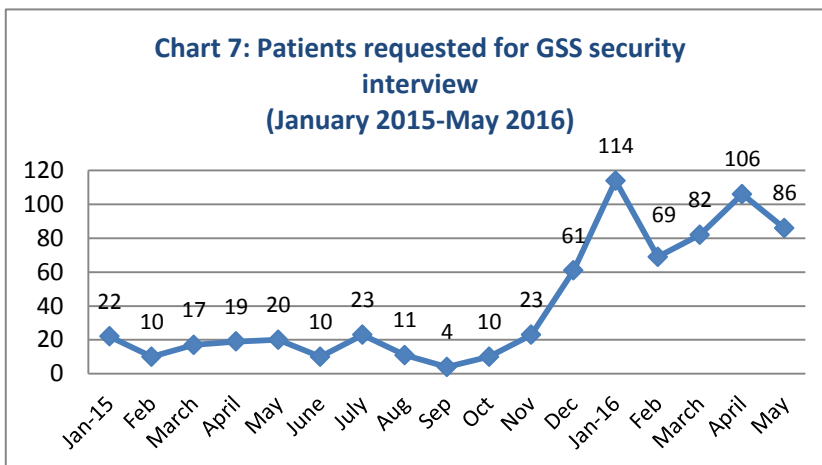
**Delayed care:** 518 patients (311 males; 207 females) were delayed in reaching health care in May, among them 138 children and 53 patients over the age of 60; they received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 518 patients delayed, 78.95% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 20.85% in Israel, and 0.19% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in: oncology (112); orthopedics (54); ophthalmology (51); cardiology (42); pediatrics (39); neurosurgery (37); hematology (36); nuclear medicine (29); urology (18); nephrology (16); general surgery and Obstetrics/gynecology (14) each; ENT and internal medicine (11) each; vascular surgery (8); neurology and endocrinology (7) each; rehabilitation (3); ICU and plastic surgery (2) each; maxilla-facial surgery, chest, dermatology, heart catheterization and heart surgery (1) each. Out of 518 delayed patient applicants, 8.88% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 35.52% waited 8-14 days, 52.9% waited 15-30 days and 2.51% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. One application was missed. 33 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of June 2016.

**Security Interviews:** 86 patients (59 males; 27 females), 82 aged between 18-60, 2 under age of 18, and 2 over 60 years were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Of 86 patients requested for interviews, 19 were oncology patients, 13 ophthalmology, 8 neurosurgery, 8 cardiology, 7 hematology, 5 nuclear medicine, 3 nephrology, 3 endocrinology, 3 general surgery, 3 orthopedics, 2 rehabilitation, 2 urology, 2 vascular surgery, 1 pediatrics, 1 plastic surgery, 1 gynecology/obstetrics, 1 chest surgery, 1 ENT, 1 neurology, 1 infertility and 1 internal medicine. The number of patients requested for a security interview as a condition to process their

permit applications has increased dramatically since November 2015 (**Chart 7**). May figures were more than 4.5 times the monthly average of 2015 (19) and the fourth highest monthly number since November 2009 when 122 patients were requested for GSS.

The increase in the number of females requested for GSS interviews, according to the Palestinian Civil Affairs and the District Liaison Office, might be attributed to a recent change of intelligence officer

personnel at Erez and to a widening of the age group for security clearance of companions from 16-35 years to 16-55 years. Of the 86 patients requested for for GSS, only 1 was approved, 5 were denied, 66 were pending, 6 were instructed to make a new appointment and another 6 were instructed to re-apply for a permit.



**Patients and companions cross Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,591 Gaza patients (and 1,461 companions) crossed Erez in May to access hospitals in the West Bank including in Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 84 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures), with 82 companions. Erez crossing was open for 26 days during regular daytime working hours and closed for 5 days (4 Saturdays and 1 Israeli national holiday in May).

#### Patient arrested while returning to Gaza

Mohammed Awad-Allah al-Bhaisi, a 23 years old male patient from Deir-Al-Balah, was arrested at Erez checkpoint while returning to Gaza on May 4, 2016, after he visited the outpatient clinic in Barzilai hospital in Ashkelon, Israel, according to al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza. Mohammed was reported to be suffering from vascular and a nerve damage from two gunshot injuries in his right foot, during a protest east of Al-Bureij refugee camp in the Gaza Strip on November 6, 2015. Mohammed's mother, Sumaya Khalil al-Bhaisi, 49 years old, told al-Mezan that she accompanied her son, who has limited movement, to Barzilai hospital for his appointment. The physician who examined Mohammed recommended another visit after 6 months. On their return, after reaching Erez, Mohammed and his mother were stopped by an Israeli dressed in civilian clothes who asked them to open their mobile phones and then confiscated them. The man led Mohammed and his mother to the hall where security personnel searched them and their belongings. Mohammed was taken away by a security person and the mother was told that he would be returned in an hour or two. The mother waited until 6:30 p.m. and then left the closed Erez crossing to return to Gaza.

When Sumaya al-Bhaisi reported the incident immediately to the Palestinian District Liaison office, she was told that Mohammed had been arrested by Israeli security. Al-Mezan reported that Mohammed was visited by an Israeli lawyer on May 17. Mohammed was scheduled to appear in court on June 23 but the hearing was postponed to July 3.

**Humanitarian health workers face limited access through at Erez.** Of 25 permit applications for health personnel submitted by WHO for entrance or exit to the Gaza Strip, only 14 (56%) applications were approved. 2 (8%), for WHO staff, were denied and the remaining 9 (36%) were still pending.

	Total	Approved	Denied	Pending
Out of Gaza: WHO staff	16	7	2	7
Out of Gaza: MoH, Health Cluster partners	1	0	0	1
Into Gaza: WHO staff (Jerusalem ID-holders)	2	2	0	0
Into Gaza: International medical delegates	6	5	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14 (56%)</b>	<b>2 (8%)</b>	<b>9 (36%)</b>