



People register at 5/5 office for travel through Erez © WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: six  
(Published 9 August 2017)

### Summary: June 2017

#### Deteriorating access for Gaza patients needing referral for health care outside Gaza

- **Decline in the number of referral decisions by the Ministry of Health for Gaza patients:** the lowest number since WHO started to monitor referrals in 2009 and 80% lower than the monthly average for 2016
- **More than half of patients with delayed/denied permits:** Of 1,920 patient applications for a permit to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in June 2017, 951 (49.5%) were approved, 20 (1.0%) were denied, and 949 (49.4%) were delayed with no response by the time of the patient's hospital appointment. Among those delayed were 222 children under the age of 18 years and 113 people aged 60 years or older (Palestinian Health Liaison and Coordination Office in Gaza).
- **Three in every five patient companions with delayed/denied permits:** The approval rate of permit applications for patient companions was 41.0%. 1.5% of companions were denied permits and the remaining 57.5% still had their application pending by the time of the patient's scheduled hospital appointment date.
- **Security interrogation of patients:** 38 patients (25 males; 13 females), were requested for interrogation by the General Security Services at Erez during June. Six were approved permits to travel for health care.
- **No access to Egypt:** Rafah terminal was closed in both directions. No medical aid and no medical delegates entered Gaza.
- **New Israeli restrictions on Gaza patient applications came into effect on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2017**
- **A 45-year-old woman with breast cancer died while awaiting a permit to exit Gaza for health care (see page 5)**
- **A two-year-old patient with kidney failure passed away while awaiting financial approval for referral out of Gaza**

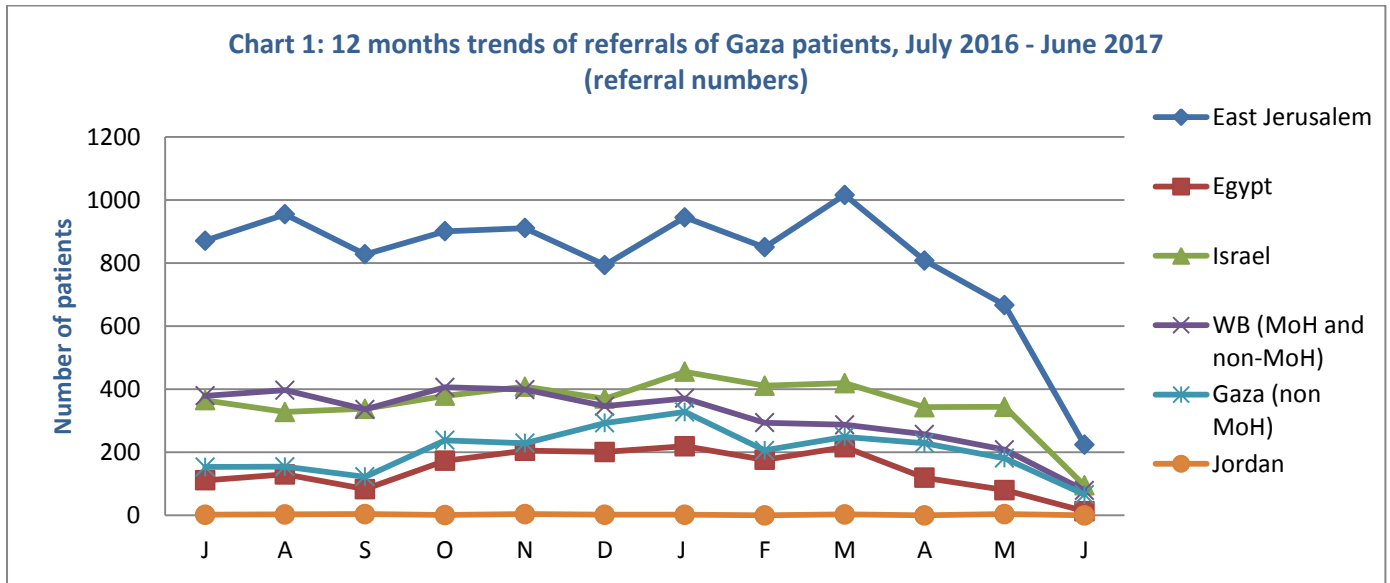
Humanitarian health workers access through Erez: WHO submitted 11 applications for health workers to either exit or enter Gaza in June. Of these, seven were approved and four were pending, see **Table 1**.

**Table 1: Humanitarian health workers access through Erez:**

	Requests	Approved	Denied	Delayed
WHO for Jerusalem staff to enter	1	0	0	1
WHO for Gaza staff to exit	2	1	0	1
Health Cluster partners	2	1	0	1
International medical delegates	6	5	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>

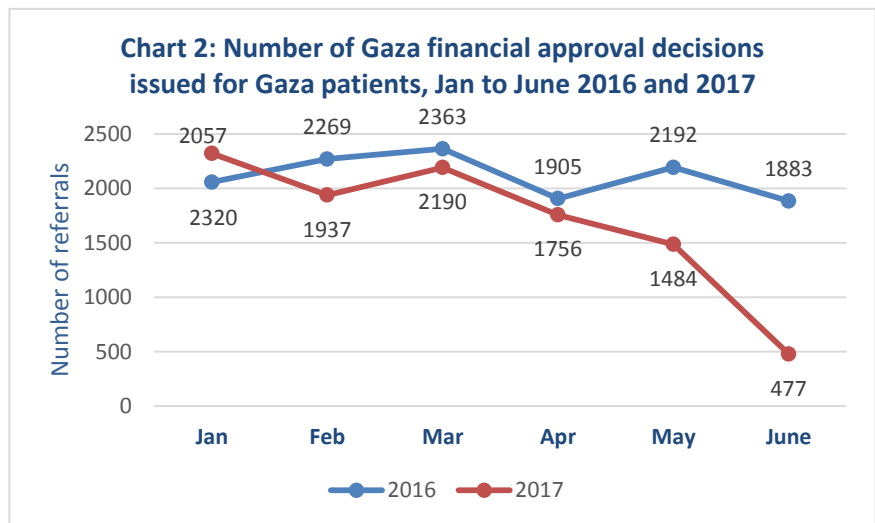
Ministry of Health referrals

The chart below shows the 12 month trend for referral destinations for Gaza patients from July 2016-June 2017<sup>1</sup>:



New challenges for referral patients

Gaza patients who need medical referrals outside the Gaza Strip have been affected by procedural delays since mid May. Procedural delays have led to a decline in the number of financial coverage documents issued for Gaza patients by the Service Purchasing Unit (SPU). The latest data received from the SPU showed a decline of around a quarter (27%) for approvals in May and three quarters (77%) in June, when compared to the average number of financial coverage approvals issued in 2016. In May, 1,484 financial coverage documents were issued for 1,317 patients, see **Chart 2**. For June, 477



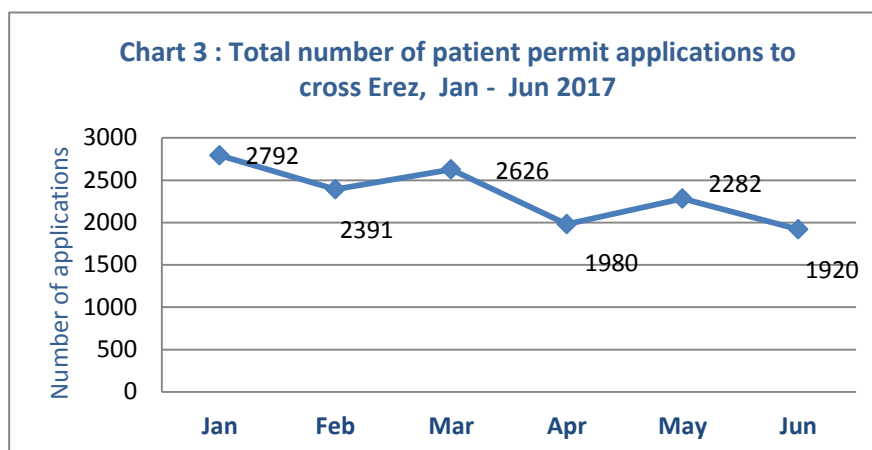
financial coverage documents were issued for Gaza patients. Previously, more than 95% of patient referral applications were approved by the medical committees of the SPU offices in Gaza and Ramallah and received financial coverage from the central SPU in Ramallah. More than 75% were issued financial coverage within seven days of submitting an application. Yousef Al-Agha, a two-year-old boy from Khan Younis, died on 28th June 2017 due to complications from a disorder called haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS) while financial coverage for transfer to an advanced pediatric intensive care unit was pending.

WHO made a site visit to the SPU office in Gaza on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2017. On this date, for patients who had applied between 15<sup>th</sup> May and 2<sup>nd</sup> June there were 2,476 cases pending financial approval from the SPU office in Ramallah. Of these, 1,313 were new requests, 1,070 were for renewal of financial coverage to the same hospital destination and 93 were for renewal of financial coverage to a changed destination hospital.

<sup>1</sup> Due to difficulty of getting data on Gaza patients referral for the month of June 2017 from the central SPU, the data was obtained from the pereferal office of SPU in Gaza.

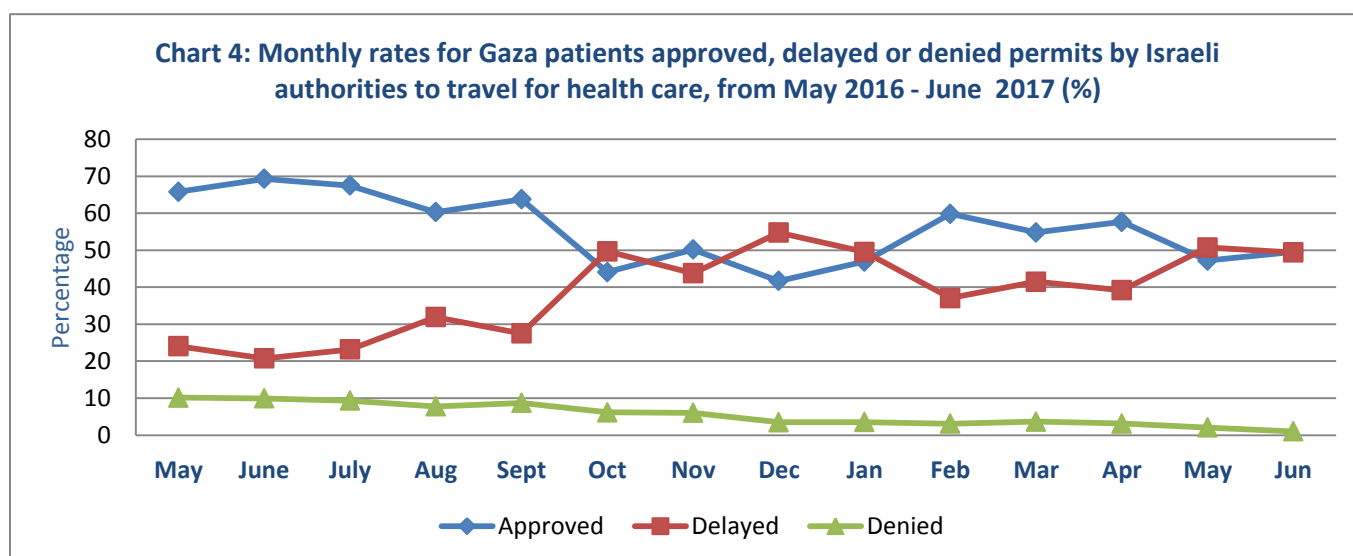
**Drop in permit approval rates to cross Erez:**

In June, there were 1,920 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care, the lowest number of applications this year, see **Chart 3**. 15.5% of patient exit permit requests (298) in June were repeat attempts: 10 patients made three applications, 134 patients made two applications to exit for health care. The remaining 84.5% of applications (1,622) represented single attempts by patients during the month.



In June, 1,118 permit applications, or 58.2% of the total number of 1,920 permit applications to cross Erez, were for access to hospitals in East Jerusalem. 490 referrals (over a quarter of the total) were to Augusta Victoria Hospital, a main destination for cancer patients; 483 (over a quarter) to Makassed Hospital; 85 (4.4%) to St John Ophthalmic Hospital; 59 (3.1%) to St Joseph Hospital and 1 (0.1%) to Princess Basma Centre for Children with Disabilities. The remainder of permit applications to cross Erez were to access hospitals in Israel (24.2%) and the West Bank (17.6%). In Israel, the top referral destinations were Hadassah (153 or 7.9% of the total); Tel-Ha-shomer (105 or 5.5%); Assuta Hospital (60 or 3.1%); and Ichilov Hospital (55 or 2.8%). In the West Bank, the top referral destinations were An-Najah University Hospital in Nablus (96 or 5.0% of total referrals) and the Surgicare Ophthalmic Hospital in Ramallah (54 referrals or 2.8% of the total). The remaining 280 referrals (14.6% of the total) were to 32 other hospitals and medical centers in Israel, the West Bank or Jordan.

In June, the Palestinian Health Liaison and Coordination Office reported that just under half or 49.5% (951) of applications for patient permits were approved by the time of the patient’s hospital appointment, a drop of approximately 12.5% compared to the average for 2016 (62%), see **Chart 4**. Of those not approved, 20 applicants (1.0%) were denied access and 949 (49.5%) applications were pending at the time of the patient’s hospital appointments, meaning that patients lost the appointments and their medical care was delayed. 38 patients were requested for Israeli security interviews.



Of the 1,920 patients applying for permits to cross Erez, 95.0% received referrals from the Ministry of Health, 2.6% were self-funded, and 1.5% were supported by Noor Ala Al-alam charity and the remaining 0.9% by other organizations.

**Denied care:**

20 patients (14 male; 6 female) were denied permits to access health care through Erez, including an eight-year-old girl. Three patients older than 60 years were also among those denied. Of the 20 denied patients, nine had appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, seven in the West Bank and four in Israeli hospitals. The following

specialties were needed by patients denied permits: ophthalmology (4); ENT (3); neurosurgery (3); oncology (2); orthopedics (2); cardiology (2); and urology, vascular surgery, general surgery and nuclear medicine (1 each). In June, 2 out of 20 denied patients submitted applications from 1-7 days prior to their hospital appointment, six applied 8-14 days prior to their appointments, ten applied 15-30 days prior, and two applied more than 30 days prior to the hospital appointment date.

**Delayed care:** 949 patients (526 males; 423 females) experienced delays in accessing health care in June, among them 222 children under the age of 18 and 113 patients aged 60 years or older. Those delayed received no response to their applications by the time of their appointments, losing their scheduled hospital appointments and delaying their access to care. Delayed patients (949) had appointments for: oncology (249); cardiology (84); hematology (84); ophthalmology (83); pediatrics (64); orthopedics (61); neurosurgery (53); nuclear medicine (48); internal medicine (33); general surgery (30); ENT and nephrology (26) each; urology and vascular surgery (21) each; obstetrics/gynecology (18); endocrinology (15); and the remaining 33 were for 12 other specialties.

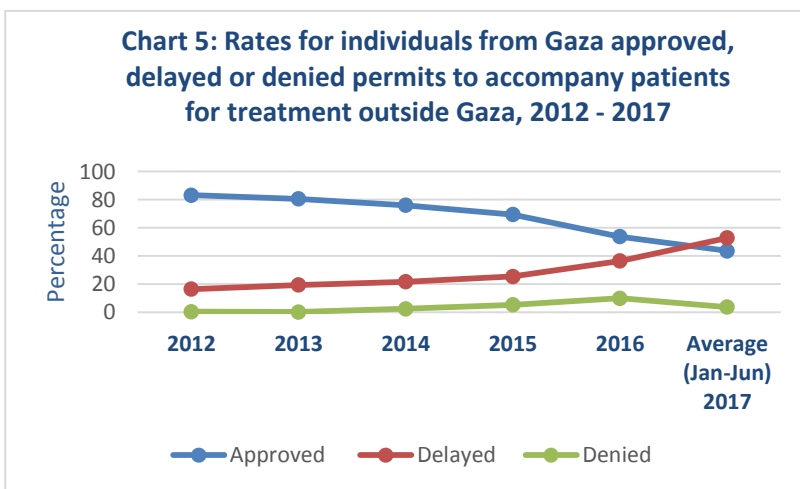
According to new Israeli guidelines effective from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2017, patients are required to submit non-urgent applications at least 20 working days prior to the date of their hospital appointment. This is a doubling of the previous guidance for patients to submit non-urgent applications ten working days prior to the hospital appointment. In June, out of the 949 delayed patients, 5% submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to hospital appointment, 23% 8-14 days, 66.5% 15-30, and 5.5% over 30 days.

Of the 949 delayed patients, 83.5% were under study by the hospital appointment date, 10.4% were requested to reapply, 4.0% did not receive any response and the responses for the remaining 2.1% (20 patients) were: 7 were waiting after a security interview, 6 were not suitable, 3 requested to change companion, 2 were waiting for a security interview appointment, one was denied and one was approved after the security interview.

**Security interrogation:** 38 patients (25 males; 13 females), three over 60 years old, were called for security interrogation by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). Of these, six were approved, 29 were delayed access to care (with 15 under study and 14 having received no answer by the time of their hospital appointments) and three were requested to reapply. There has been an overall increase in the number of patients requested for GSS since December 2015.

**Patient companions:**

In June, 2,121 applications for permits to cross Erez for relatives accompanying patients, including parents or other companions for children, were submitted to 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 all women under 45 years. In June, 41.0% were approved, 1.5% were denied and 57.5% 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 865 Gaza patients and 773 companions crossed Erez in June to access Palestinian, Israeli, or Jordanian hospitals. Of these, back-to-back ambulances transferred 47 patients, with 43 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 24 days for daytime working hours and closed on four days (Saturdays).

### **Rafah crossing – no access to Egypt**

According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was closed in June for exit for the third consecutive month since April 2017, including for patients. No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during June. Since the beginning of 2017, the terminal was open for only 10 days during January, February and March, 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 each month for health-related reasons.

### **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 previous period of clearance was three months, and there was no previous explicit guidance for the period of denial.

### **Cancer patient dies awaiting a permit to exit Gaza for health care**

Abeer Abu-Jaiab was a 45-year-old woman from Maghazi refugee camp in the Middle Area of the Gaza Strip and the mother of nine children. She was pregnant with her youngest daughter when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in September 2012. At that time, following the birth of her daughter, Abeer was treated with six cycles of chemotherapy at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem and An-Najah Hospital in Nablus. In October 2014, Abeer had investigations at Assuta hospital in Israel, which revealed that the cancer had spread. She subsequently received follow-up treatment in both Assuta and An-Najah Hospital.



In January 2017, Abeer was referred to Augusta Victoria Hospital for treatment with the drug Herceptin. She then applied twice to Israeli authorities for permits to travel for appointments on 15<sup>th</sup> February and 22<sup>nd</sup> March at Augusta Victoria Hospital. However, by the time of her hospital appointments she was told that her applications were under study and so she lost the appointments and was delayed in accessing care. Abeer's health deteriorated over the four-month period prior to her death and during this period she was admitted five times to the European Gaza Hospital. Abeer died in Al-Aqsa Hospital in Gaza on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017 while awaiting a permit to access healthcare at Augusta Victoria Hospital.