

# MONTHLY REPORT

## May 2020



## Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **4,610**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

**901** Gaza

**3,663** West Bank

 **66%**

of Gaza patient permit applications approved

**48%**

of Gaza companion permit applications approved



No data available for West Bank patient and companion permit applications following suspension to functioning of Civil Affairs Office

 **0**

Gaza patients called for security interview

### IN FOCUS

*Patients in the Gaza Strip unable to obtain Israeli-issued permits to access the healthcare*

# Part 1 Referrals

## May Referrals by the Ministry of Health


In May, the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 4,610 referrals to non-MoH facilities. This represented continuation of the significantly reduced number of referrals (a 40% reduction compared to an average 7,665 referrals per month in the first quarter of 2020), in the context of restricted referrals during the COVID-19 outbreak in oPt. The reduction, however, has disproportionately affected Gaza during May, which saw an 11% decline in referrals issued from 1,011 in April, while the West Bank number of referrals increased by 19% from 3,069 in April. These changes occurred during a period of general easing of movement restrictions for COVID-19, but in the context of the Palestinian Authority's announcement on 19 May to absolve agreements with Israel and the United States, as well as end referrals to Israeli hospitals.

79% (3,663) of referrals were for West Bank patients, including 385 referrals for patients from East Jerusalem, with 20% (901) for Gaza patients and 1 for a patient in Jordan. The origin of 45 (1%) referrals was not reported.

The proportion of referrals destined for hospitals within the West Bank, outside East Jerusalem, increased from 40% on average for the first quarter to 57% in May. Similarly, referrals within Gaza increased from 7% to 11%. Meanwhile, referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals decreased from 41% to 28%; to Israeli hospitals from 5% to 3% and to Egypt from 6% to 0.3%. 0.1% were to Jordan.

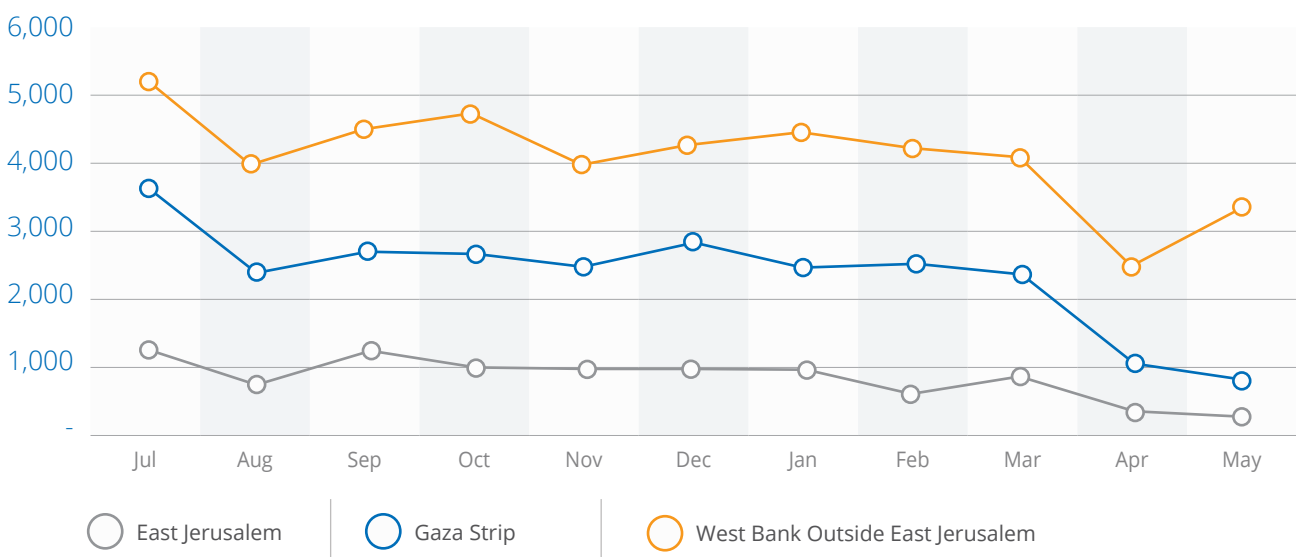
14% (662) of referrals were for patients under 18-year-old and 34% (1,569) were for those aged 60 years or older. 47% of referrals were for female patients.

 **901**  
Gaza

 **3,663**  
West Bank

referrals approved financial coverage for healthcare outside the Palestinian Ministry of Health

**Chart 1** Number of referrals issued by the Palestinian MoH by place of origin, July 2019 to May 2020



# Part 2 Access

## The Gaza Strip

The number of permit applications to exit the Gaza Strip continued to be very low, with 160 applications in May from 159 in April 2020, which was the lowest recorded since April 2009. In March 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in the occupied Palestinian territory, there had already been a substantial decline to 1,279 from a monthly average of 1,777 in January and February. Restrictions in the eligibility criteria for patients to access essential health services in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak contributed to the lower numbers applying in the first half of May, in addition to patient fears about traveling out of Gaza and the deterrent of quarantine for all those returning after travel also contributed to reduced applications. In the latter part of May, the end to coordination of permits by the Palestinian Authority contributed to the substantially reduced number of patient and companion permit applications. Despite the low numbers applying during this period, more than a third of patient applications were unsuccessful. The approval rate for patient applications was just 66%.

In May, after the end to functioning of the Gaza Coordination Office, 10 applications out of the total (160) were submitted to the Israeli authorities by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) for appointments on 31 May, and all were approved. The PCHR stepped in to assist the coordination of patient permits after the Gaza Coordination Office stopped functioning on 19 May 2020, following the declaration of the Palestinian Authority to absolve agreements with Israel and the USA on 19 May 2020.

Of the 160 patient applications in May, just under two-fifths (41%) were for cancer care. Other specialties included haematology (20%); cardiology (12%); paediatrics (7%); and neurosurgery (3%). The remaining 17% were for 11 other specialties. Close to half (49%) of applications were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 33% for Israeli hospitals and 18% for hospitals in the West Bank. Close to half (46%) of applications in May were for children under 18 and a tenth (10%) for patients aged 60 years or older. 41% of applications were for female patients and 86% were for medical care funded by the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

### Approved permit applications:

105 (60 M; 45 F) or 66% of the 160 applications (10 by PCHR) to cross Erez in May 2020 were approved. This is close to the average approval rate for the first four months of the year (67%). More than two-fifths (44%) of approved permits were for children under 18 and a tenth (11%) were for patients aged 60 years or older. Chart 2 shows the trend for Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications over the past 12 months.



**160** patients applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Erez/Beit Hanoun to access healthcare



**66%** approved



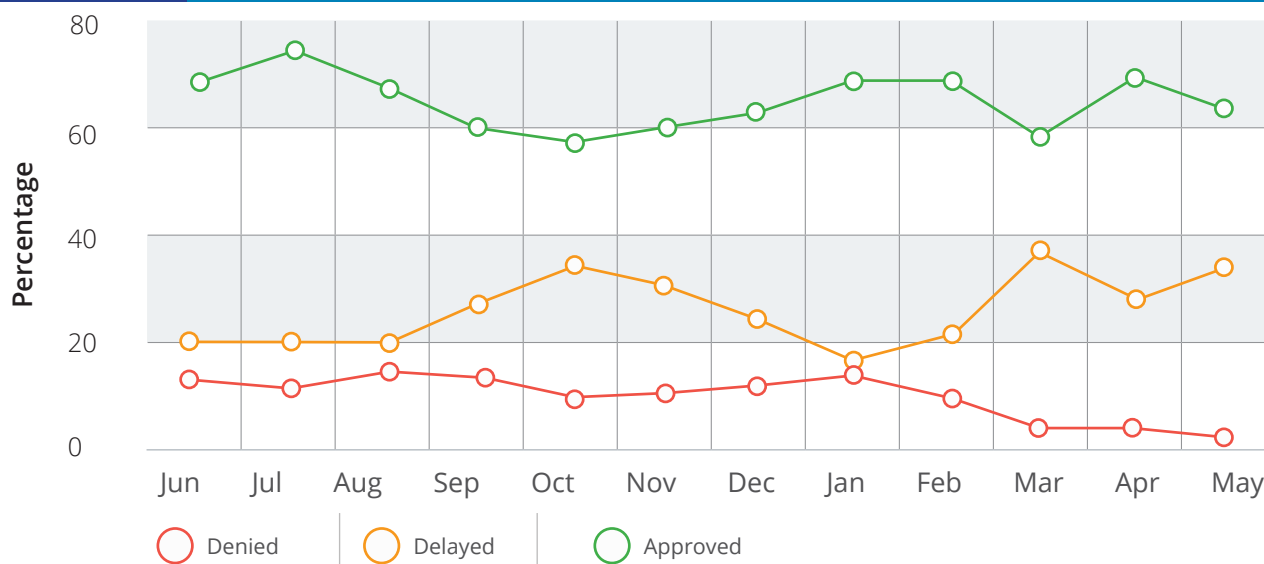
**2%** denied



**33%** delayed

**Chart 2**

Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications, June 2019 to May 2020



### Denied care:

3 patient applications (2 male; 1 female), or 2% of the total, were denied permits to cross Erez to reach healthcare in May. Those denied included a 7-year-old boy with immunodeficiency, a 37-year-old man with a brain tumour in need of radiotherapy and a 38-year-old woman with thyroid cancer.

### Delayed care:

52 patient applications (32 male; 20 female), or 33% of the total, were delayed access to care, receiving no definitive response to their application by the date of their hospital appointment. Of these, 28 applications (54%) were for children under the age of 18 and 3 applications (6%) were for patients aged 60 years or older.

A third (33%) of those delayed had appointments for cancer care (oncology), 23% for haematology, and 23% for cardiology. The remaining 21% were for 7 other specialties. Of the 52 delayed applications, 38 (73%) were 'under study' at the time of appointment.

## Patient companions

There were 184 companion permit applications to Israeli authorities to cross Erez to accompany patients in May. These applications include parents or other companions applying to accompany children. Only one companion is allowed to accompany each Gaza patient. In May, 89 companion permit applications (48% of the total) were approved, 6 applications (3%) were denied and the remaining 89 (48%) were delayed, receiving no definitive response by the time of the patient's appointment. Chart 3 shows the trend for Israeli responses to patient companion applications over the last 12 months.

 **0**

patients called for security interrogation



**184** patient companion applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Erez to accompany patients



**48% approved**



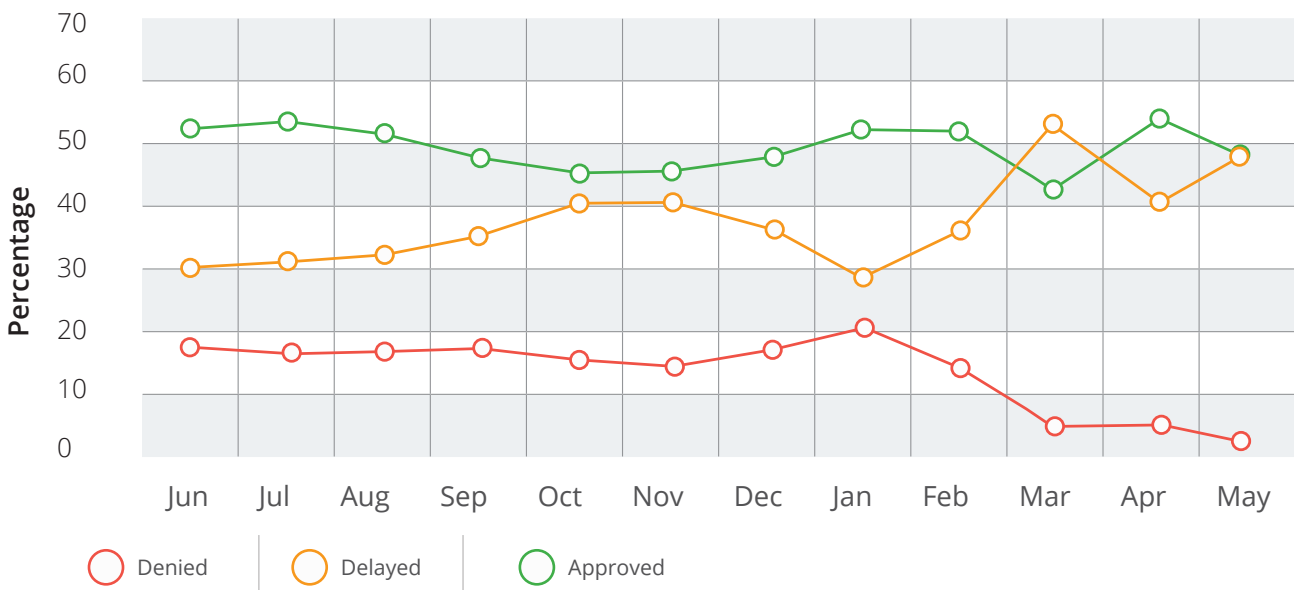
**3% denied**



**48% delayed**

### Chart 3

#### Israeli responses to Gaza companion applications, June 2019 to May 2020



## Patients and companions crossing Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 107 Gaza patients and 86 companions crossed Erez in May to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of these, 21 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 18 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 26 days for daytime working hours and closed on 5 days (5 Saturdays).



**107**

patients crossed Erez for healthcare



**86**

patient companions crossed Erez

## Rafah crossing – Egypt



In May, there were 1,168 entries and 0 exits through Rafah. The terminal was open for return for 3 days from 12 to 14 May. No specific data on patient crossings was reported by Rafah terminal authorities.

## The West Bank

In May, an unknown number of applications were submitted to Israeli authorities for permits for patients and their companions from the West Bank.

In the context of the permits system imposed by Israel, and following suspension of coordination of permit applications between Palestinian and Israeli authorities on 19 May, patients and companions from the West Bank no longer applied to Israeli authorities for permits to enter East Jerusalem and Israel through the Palestinian Civil Affairs Office, which has stopped fully functioning. Data was unavailable for the first part of the month, and since 19 May Palestinian patients and their companions have been applying directly to Israeli authorities for permits.

Currently, there is no system in place to continue monitoring the permits system for these patients and companions, which is a major barrier to promoting oversight and appeals on behalf of those who are delayed and denied access to essential health services.

An urgent solution is needed to end access restrictions for Palestinian patients and to ensure the continuation of oversight for systems creating barriers to health access for Palestinian patients and their companions.



No data available for West Bank patient and companion permit applications following suspension to functioning of Civil Affairs Office

## In Focus

### Patients in Gaza unable to obtain Israeli-issued permits to access healthcare

#### Mira is a 4-year-old girl from Khan Yunis

She was diagnosed with a cancer in her eye known as a retinoblastoma in February this year, and now she needs an Israeli-issued permit to reach a hospital in Jordan to have specialist eye surgery that is not available for her in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Mira has lost vision in her right eye and needs surgery urgently to prevent spread of her tumour, and to prevent any further loss of vision. She had an appointment at the Jordan Hospital in Amman for 4 June, but she missed this appointment because her family was unable to find a means of coordinating her permit after end to the functioning of the Palestinian Coordination Office.

Mira's mother commented, *"I fear losing my daughter because we have been unable to get help from anyone."*



#### Waseem is 25 years old and has a congenital heart problem



Waseem is from Beit Lahia in the north of Gaza Strip. He was born with a congenital heart problem that involved the narrowing of one of his heart valves. When he was a child, he underwent treatments including a procedure to dilate the valve and open-heart surgery. The surgery was effective at that time, and Waseem finished school and went onto graduate from Al-Azhar University in business administration in 2018.

In March 2018, however, Waseem noticed general tiredness and had difficulty breathing. Investigations at Shifa Hospital revealed that the same heart valve was not working properly. He was referred to Makassed Hospital in East Jerusalem and had further surgery there in April 2018. After he returned to Gaza, he suffered complications of his surgery with an infection in the heart. He was treated in the intensive care unit at Shifa Hospital where he stayed for approximately six weeks, until his condition stabilized. Waseem attended several follow up assessments at Makassed Hospital after his health had improved, the last of which was on 3 February 2020.

On 14 April 2020, Waseem was admitted again to Shifa Hospital with infection in his heart and stayed as an inpatient again for almost two months.

Now he has been referred urgently to Makassed Hospital for further surgery that is unavailable in Gaza. He had an appointment on 15 June 2020, but since the suspension of permit processing and coordination between Palestinian and Israeli authorities he has been unable to obtain a permit to exit.

Frustrated, Waseem discharged himself from Shifa Hospital. He said, "I'm tired of hospitals. I need to be in a calm environment and the doctors have agreed that I can receive antibiotics at home for now."

Waseem and patients like him currently have no means to exit the Gaza Strip to access essential health services. An urgent solution is needed to protect the fundamental right to the highest attainable standard of health for Palestinian patients.

**Patients like Mira and Waseem in the Gaza Strip now have no means to obtain Israeli-issued permits to access the healthcare they need.**

An urgent solution is needed to safeguard access to essential healthcare for patients in the Gaza Strip and ensure protection for the fundamental rights of Palestinian patients.