



**MEDIA RELEASE**

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## **Performance Audit Report**

### **Waiting Lists for Elective Surgery and Medical Treatment**

The ACT Auditor-General, Mrs Tu Pham, has today presented a Performance Audit report titled '**Waiting Lists for Elective Surgery and Medical Treatment**', to the Speaker for tabling in the ACT Legislative Assembly.

On 23 June 2010, the Legislative Assembly passed a resolution to request the Auditor-General to 'conduct an audit of Waiting Lists for Elective Surgery and Medical Treatment and consider as part of the audit concerns raised about the management of the elective surgery'. In response to the request of the Legislative Assembly, the Auditor-General decided, in accordance with the *Auditor-General Act 1996*, to conduct this audit.

Audit acknowledges the management of the waiting lists for elective surgery and medical treatment is a complex process that can be influenced by practices of various parties within the public health system, including doctors and other medical practitioners, and by a number of factors, some of which are outside the control of ACT Health. Audit also notes that there are competing demands for emergency and elective surgery in ACT public hospitals, and the pressure of delivering emergency surgery has also impacted on the delivery of elective surgery.

#### **Audit Conclusions and Key Findings**

- Overall, elective surgery waiting lists are administered in the ACT within a sound framework of policies, guidelines and procedures. However, ACT Health's implementation and monitoring processes were not managed well to deliver the intended outcomes.
- Current practices in compiling the waiting lists have compromised the policy intention of promoting clinically appropriate, consistent and equitable management of elective surgery waiting lists. In particular, downgrades of patients' urgency category, often without documented clinical reasons, raised considerable doubts about the reliability and appropriateness of the clinical classifications for patients on the waiting lists.
- In the absence of required documents, Audit was unable to form a view on the validity of the clinical reclassifications. In particular, Audit found that in 2009-10, 259 patients in Category 1 were reclassified and most of these reclassifications (97 percent) occurred without documented clinical reasons; and 55 reclassifications (32 percent) had no evidence of having been approved by a doctor.

- There were deficiencies in processing patients on to the elective surgery waiting list. These included:
  - many patients' consent forms were partially completed by patients, and did not meet the requirement to demonstrate that patients fully understood the information provided by doctors about the nature of the operation, and the material risks inherent in the treatment;
  - the consent forms did not always have a witness's signature. This may expose ACT Health and the medical practitioners to risks, including potential legal risks and adverse outcomes for patients; and
  - Request for Admission (RFA) forms were sometimes kept in the surgeons' private rooms and not forwarded to the hospital for processing in a timely manner.
- Notwithstanding increased funding by the Commonwealth and ACT Governments in the recent years, the elective surgery waiting lists have not shown improvements. In 2008-09 (latest available comparative information), the ACT compared unfavourably to other jurisdictions. Data for the ACT from ACT Health indicated a general worsening situation of waiting lists for elective surgery in 2009-10, compared to 2008-09.
- The strategies implemented by ACT Health have not been adequate to address increased demand, and reduce the waiting lists for elective surgery. Other than recent progress made in outsourcing various surgical procedures to private sector providers, there has been limited progress or improvements on other options, such as transferring patients to other doctors with a shorter waiting list; transferring patients to another hospital; or increasing theatre utilisation.
- Further, recent reviews commissioned by ACT Health indicate significant issues concerning the delivery of surgical services and management of operating theatres, which have contributed to the long waiting lists.
- ACT Health is implementing the *Elective Surgery Access Plan 2010-13* to meet the immediate needs of increasing demand for elective surgery, and introducing changes in elective surgery management. The success of this Plan depends on its effective implementation, which requires adequate resources, engagement of hospital staff and improved communication with, and cooperation from surgeons and other medical professions.
- There were significant delays in assessing medical appointments in areas reviewed by Audit, namely the Urology and Gastroenterology units at the Central Outpatients Department in The Canberra Hospital.

- A recent internal review of the outpatient services at The Canberra Hospital (TCH) conducted by ACT Health found deficiencies in strategic planning, inconsistent applications of policies and procedures across the hospital's Outpatients Departments (OPDs), ad hoc processes for managing the waiting lists, and inefficient communications with clinicians, consumers and staff. The review report included 35 recommendations to address strategic and immediate operational needs. ACT Health advised that implementation plans are being developed by the hospital to address the recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

The audit made eleven recommendations to address the issues raised. ACT Health agreed, agreed in principle or in part to all the recommendations.

### **Further Information**

For further information, please contact the Office on 6207 0833. Copies of the report are available from the ACT Auditor-General's Office (Level 4, 11 Moore Street, Canberra City) and from its website, [www.audit.act.gov.au](http://www.audit.act.gov.au).