WAITING TIMES FOR NEW APPOINTMENTS AT SPECIALIST OUTPATIENT CLINICS (SOC) IN RESTRUCTURED HOSPITALS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the waiting times experienced by subsidised patients requesting for a new SOC appointment at the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT / Otolaryngology) and Urology Departments for the period July to September 06.

INTRODUCTION

Specialist Outpatient Clinics (SOC) cater to patients who require specialist care but who do not need to be admitted as inpatients for clinical attention. Patients at these Specialist Outpatient Clinics may either be self-referred or referred from general practitioners or specialists in the private and public sectors. Consultations at the public sector SOCs are by appointment only, and patients are charged subsidised or private rates, depending on the source of referral.

WAITING TIME FOR NEW SOC APPOINTMENTS

The Ministry of Health collects statistics on waiting times experienced by patients making new appointments at SOC, as a measure of the SOC’s capacity to attend to new patients. MOH defines the waiting time for a new SOC appointment as the number of calendar days from the date when the patient first requested for an appointment to the appointment date allocated for doctor consultation.

This paper presents the subsidised patient volumes and waiting times of new SOC appointments made for two specialties common to most hospitals viz. Ear, Nose & Throat (ENT) and Urology, for the period July 06 to September 06. The ENT department deals with disorders of the head and neck region, primarily those involving the ear, nose (including the sinuses) and throat (including voice and speech disorders). The Urology department deals with diseases such as urinary tract infections, kidney stones, infertility (in male patients) and cancers of the genital or urinary system.

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2 For this purpose, MOH’s waiting time statistics exclude waiting times of patients who rejected the earliest / first available appointment date offered to them; walk-in patients; and those referred from the Emergency Department who receive medical consultation within the same day. Waiting times for follow-up appointments are also excluded.
New & Repeat SOC Attendances

For the period July to September 06, there were 28,031 subsidised attendances at ENT departments in the public hospitals. Around 68% of these were repeat or follow-up attendances, while 32% were new attendances. Chart 1 illustrates the new and repeat subsidised attendances seen in the various institutions.

Chart 1: Number of New & Repeat Subsidised SOC Appointments for the ENT Specialty by Institution, Jul – Sep 06

New SOC Appointments

There were 9,047 new subsidised ENT attendances for the period July to September 06. SGH saw 29.4% of all new attendances, followed by TTSH (21.3%), CGH (19.4%) and NUH (18.4%) (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Number of New Subsidised SOC Appointments for ENT Specialty by Institution, Jul – Sep 06

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There is a SOC at KKH for this specialty. However due to small volume, the ENT at KKH has been excluded from analysis.
Waiting Times of New SOC Appointments

The median and 90th percentile waiting times for subsidised ENT patients are plotted in Chart 3; with institutions ranked in descending order of their 90th percentile waiting times.

The median waiting times in various hospitals ranged from 3.5 days to 34 days, while 90th percentile waiting times ranged from 7 days to 47 days. In other words, the majority of the patients were able to obtain an appointment at the ENT departments within one and a half months.

Chart 3: Median & 90th percentile Waiting Times (Subsidised) ENT Specialty by Institution, Jul – Sep 06

Waiting times were generally longer at institutions which have larger volume of new and repeat attendances, such as SGH and TTSH.

Among the institutions, SGH had the longest 90th percentile (47 days) waiting time, while TTSH had the longest median waiting time (34 days). On the other hand, the 50th percentile patient at CGH was able to see the doctor as soon as 3.5 days after the date of request; while the 90th percentile patient at CGH was able to see the doctor within 7 days after request.

UROLOGY

New & Repeat SOC Attendances

There were 21,799 subsidised attendances at the Urology departments of restructured hospitals during the period July to September 2006. The majority of subsidised Urology cases seen were repeat attendances (71%); with new attendances making up the other 29%. Chart 4 illustrates the new and repeat subsidised attendances at various institutions.

5 50th Percentile
Volume of New SOC Appointments

There were 6,235 new subsidised SOC attendances for the period July 06 to September 06. 34.0% of new Urology attendances were seen at SGH, followed by CGH (22.5%) and TTSH (22.1%) (see Chart 5).

Waiting Times of New SOC Appointments

The median and 90th percentile waiting times for the subsidised Urology attendances are plotted in Chart 6; with institutions ranked in descending order of their 90th percentile waiting time.

The median waiting times in the various hospitals ranged from 3 days to 23 days, while the 90th percentile waiting times ranged from 6 days to 34 days. This means that most patients would be seen within a month after their request.
AH had the longest median and 90th percentile waiting time at 23 days and 34 days respectively. On the other hand, the median and 90th percentile waiting times were shortest at NUH, at 3 days (for median) and 6 days (for 90th percentile) respectively.

**Concluding Remarks**

Subsidised SOC patients experience varying waiting times across various restructured hospitals for ENT and Urology specialties. The volume of attendances seen across the various institutions also vary widely, with some institutions such as SGH attracting as much as two to four fold more new attendances than smaller ones such as AH.

Among ENT specialty departments, CGH and AH had the shortest waiting times at 7 days (CGH) and 9 days (AH) for 90th percentile. Among Urology specialty departments, NUH had the shortest waiting times (6 days for 90th percentile). Patients who wish to be seen earlier may consider seeking appointments at institutions where waiting times are shorter.

Overall, most subsidised patients seeking first consultations at ENT and Urology specialties, were seen within one-and-a-half months. These are mostly non-emergencies which would not require immediate attention. Where patients require urgent attention, the referring polyclinics would fast-track their SOC appointments to ensure early attention. For emergencies, the patient would be directed to the nearest hospital’s Emergency Department for immediate attention.