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

CARDIOLOGY

By Lien Wen Di and Henry Sim

ABSTRACT

This paper presents waiting times experienced by subsidised patients seeking their first outpatient appointment at cardiology specialist outpatient clinics (SOC) at the National Heart Centre and the restructured hospitals.

INTRODUCTION

The specialty of cardiology deals with disorders of the heart and blood vessels, which include congenital heart defects, coronary artery disease, heart failure and valvular heart diseases.

Some common conditions seen at the cardiology specialty departments of the National Heart Centre and restructured hospitals include chest pain or discomfort (angina), shortness of breath, palpitations, heart murmurs and ECG abnormalities.

This paper presents the attendance volumes and waiting times for new appointments made by subsidised patients at cardiology Specialist Outpatient Clinics of restructured hospitals in 2006.

1 Lien Wen Di is a Research Analyst and Henry Sim is a Statistician with the Health Information Division Branch, MOH.

2 MOH 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. For this purpose, the 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.

3 SOC patients are accorded subsidy if they are referred from polyclinics.

4 Specialist Outpatient Clinics (SOC) cater to patients who require specialist care but who do not need to be admitted as inpatients for clinical attention. SOC patients at restructured hospitals may either be self-referred or referred from general practitioners or specialists in the private and public sectors. Consultations are by appointment only, and patients are charged subsidised or private rates, depending on the source of referrals.
ATTENDANCES AT SPECIALIST OUTPATIENT CLINICS

Market Share

In 2006, there were 135,994 subsidised attendances for cardiology at the National Heart Centre (NHC), National University Hospital (NUH), Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), Changi General Hospital (CGH) and Alexandra Hospital (AH). See Table 1.

Table 1: New and Repeat SOC Attendances (Subsidised) for the Cardiology Specialty by Institutions, Year 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>New</th>
<th>Repeat</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NHC</td>
<td>10,372</td>
<td>46,641</td>
<td>57,013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUH</td>
<td>4,769</td>
<td>23,996</td>
<td>28,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTSH</td>
<td>4,902</td>
<td>22,671</td>
<td>27,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGH</td>
<td>3,823</td>
<td>15,123</td>
<td>18,946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH</td>
<td>1,267</td>
<td>2,430</td>
<td>3,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>25,133</td>
<td>110,861</td>
<td>135,994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NHC sees the largest share (42%) of subsidised cardiology attendances, twice more than the next busiest cardiology departments in NUH (21%) and TTSH (20%). Please see Chart 1.

Chart 1: SOC Attendances for the Cardiology Specialty by Institutions, Year 2006

New Attendances

There were 25,133 new subsidised attendances in 2006, which is a 7.3% increase over the 23,425 new attendances seen in 2005. (See Chart 2.) Overall, new attendances make up 18.5% of all attendances. An exception is AH, which sees a relatively higher proportion of new attendances (34.3%).
Rising Attendances

From 2002 to 2006, subsidised cardiology attendances rose by 31.4%. This represents a compounded average growth rate of 7.1% per year. Attendances rose in surges - 18.0% in 2002, 14.7% in 2004 after near zero-growth in volume in 2003 (SOC attendances slumped during the 2003 SARS period), and then again by 10.0% last year (2006). See Chart 3.

Over this period (2002-06), attendances at CGH grew fastest (65.9% increase), followed by NUH (49.2% increase) and TTSH (40.3% increase). NHC’s subsidised attendances rose by 7.2% over the same period. See Chart 4.
WAITING TIMES FOR NEW SOC APPOINTMENTS

Referrals from polyclinics differ in terms of their medical urgency. Patients requiring emergency treatment (e.g. those with acute chest pain) are sent immediately to the nearest Emergency Department. Patients who are assessed by their polyclinic doctor to require earlier specialist medical attention are given fast-track appointments. For other cases, patients would be given routine appointments based on availability.

Waiting Times vary across Institutions

The median\(^5\) and 90\(^{th}\) percentile waiting times experienced by subsidised cardiology patients in the year 2006 are plotted in Chart 5 below; with institutions ranked in descending order of their median waiting times. The median waiting times ranged from 17 days at CGH to 89 days at AH, while 90\(^{th}\) percentile waiting times ranged from 29 days at CGH to 155 days at TTSH.

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5 Median = 50\(^{th}\) Percentile
Fast-Track for Early Appointments

The median and 90th percentile waiting times for fast-track cases at various SOC are plotted in Chart 6 below. NHC and NUH have the shortest waiting times when it comes to fast-tracked cases – with median waiting times of 10 days and 5 days respectively.

Chart 6: Median and 90th Percentile Waiting Times for Fast-Tracked New SOC Appointments at Cardiology Specialty by Institutions, Year 2006

Note: Data from AH is not available.

CARDIOLOGISTS

Over the last 3 years, the number of cardiologists practising in Singapore have increased by 30% from 83 cardiologists at end 2003, to 108 cardiologists at end 2006. In the public sector, the number of cardiologists has increased even more – by 36% from 47 cardiologists at end 2003 to 64 cardiologists by end 2006. See Chart 7.

Chart 7: No. of Cardiologists (Public & Private) registered with Singapore Medical Council, Year 2003-06
At present, 20 doctors are undergoing training to be cardiologists. With the revision to registration requirements for foreign-trained doctors, we can expect more foreign doctors to supplement the current pool of cardiology trainees to meet rising demand.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cardiology departments in the public sector face the challenge of having to continually cope up with rising cardiology attendances covering a wide spectrum of heart conditions.

Almost one out of five cardiology attendances is a new referral, with patients requiring earlier specialist assessment being put on fast-track appointments.

To meet rising demand over the long-term, we need more cardiologists to be trained and recruited for the public sector, including the recruitment of qualified foreign doctors. This is a policy which MOH has embarked upon and will pursue.

Systems are in place to ensure that patients receive timely access to the necessary care. However as medical conditions can change over time, patients who feel that their heart condition has deteriorated, should return to their doctor or the nearest Emergency Medicine Department (if they have acute symptoms such as chest pain) to be reviewed.

Feedback to MOH

If you have any comments or questions on the information paper, you can either email us directly at moh_info@moh.gov.sg. Alternatively, you can also fax or write to us at:

Ministry of Health
College of Medicine Building
16 College Road
Singapore 169854
Tel: 63259220
Fax: 62241677