



People register at the PA 5/5 registration office before crossing to the Israeli side of Erez © WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: Eight
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Summary: August 2017

- **45% of patients delayed/denied security permits by Israeli authorities:** Of 1,883 patient applications for a permit to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in August 2017, 55% were approved, 3% were denied, and 42% were delayed with no response by the time of the patient's hospital appointment. Among those delayed were 169 children under the age of 18 years and 76 people aged 60 years or older.
- **More than half of patient companions delayed/denied permits:** Of 2,120 permit applications for patient companions in August 2017, 43% were approved, 3% were denied and 54% were delayed, with their application still pending by the time of the patient's hospital appointment date.
- **Security interrogation of patients:** 62 patients (44 males; 18 females) were requested for interrogation by the General Security Services at Erez during August. Four were approved permits to travel for health care.
- **Persistent challenges for Gaza patients seeking financial coverage for health referrals:** 1,297 requests for financial coverage for Gaza patients were approved by the Services Purchasing Unit of the Palestinian Ministry of Health in August. This is 36% lower than the number of financial coverage requests approved during August last year.
- **Limited access to Egypt:** Rafah terminal was open during six days. 22 patients with 20 companions exited to Egypt. No medical aid and no medical delegates entered Gaza.
- **Five cancer patients died while awaiting security permits to travel for health care**
- **Case study:** Jehad, a 24-year-old patient with Hodgkin's lymphoma, is unable to access diagnostics and treatment outside of Gaza after nine applications to exit through Erez checkpoint.

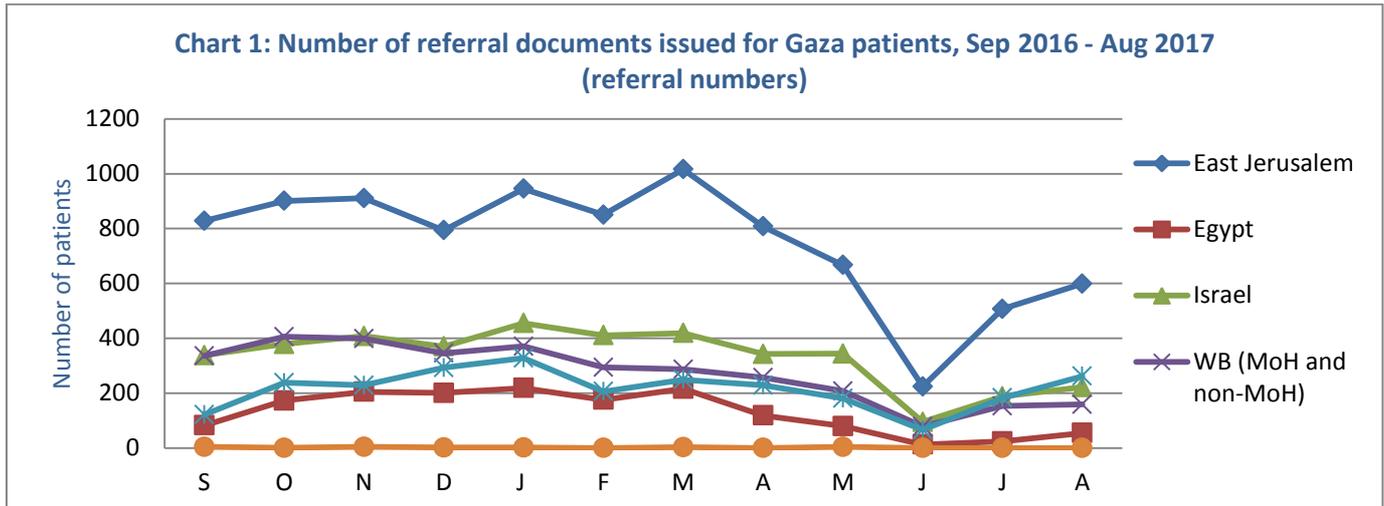
Humanitarian health workers access through Erez: WHO submitted nine applications for health workers to either exit or enter Gaza in August. Seven were approved, one WHO staff member holding Jerusalem ID was denied and one Gaza staff member was pending.

Part 1: Referrals

Ministry of Health referrals

Gaza patients requiring medical referral outside the Gaza Strip have been affected by procedural delays since mid-May, with a decline in the number and slowing of the process for issuing financial coverage documents for Gaza patients by the Services Purchasing Unit (SPU).

In August, 1,297 referral documents were issued for Gaza patients. This number is 40% lower compared to the monthly average in the first quarter of 2017 (2,149) and 34% lower than the corresponding month of 2016. However, this represents an increase in the number of referral documents for Gaza patients issued compared to June and July. **Chart 1** shows a 12-month trend of the number of referral documents issued for Gaza patients from September 2016-August 2017, split by destination of referral.



Processing time: Of patients accepted for referral from January to May 2017, 99% were approved by the SPU within seven days of submitting an application. From June to August 2017, 36% of applications were approved within one week, with over three in five applications taking longer than seven days to process, see **Table 1**.

Processing time (days)	Applications (%)
1-7	36
8-14	17
15-21	12
22-31	14
32-45	10
46-60	4
61-90	6
91-120	1

Part 2: ACCESS

Israeli permits for patients to cross Erez: There has been an overall decline in the number of applications to cross Erez for health care. In August, the number of applications (1,883) was the lowest since December 2017.

1,028 or just over half (55%) of applicants received security approval to travel to access health care. 63 applicants (3%) were denied security approval to travel for health care and 792 applicants (42%) were delayed, with their applications still pending at the time of the patient's hospital appointments.

Of the 1,883 patients applications, 28% were for children under 18 and 17% were for elderly patients over 60 – years- old. 48% of applications were for female patients and 94% of applications were for medical care funded by the Ministry of Health. The top three specialties accounted for approximately half of applications: oncology (31%), haematology (9%) and paediatrics (9%).

The majority (60%) of permit applications to cross Erez were for access to hospitals in East Jerusalem. 21% were for access to Israeli hospitals and 20% were to hospitals in the West Bank.

Denied care: 63 patients (47 male; 16 female) were denied permits to access health care through Erez in August, including six children under the age of 18 years and five patients aged 60 years or older.

Delayed care: 792 patients (424 males; 368 females) experienced delays in accessing health care in August, among them 169 children under the age of 18 and 76 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.

According to new Israeli guidelines effective from 7th 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.

Security interrogation: 62 patients (44 men and 18 women), 12 over 60 years old, were called for security interrogation by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) in August. After interrogation 4 patients were approved, 4 denied and 54 were pending.

Patient companions: In August there were 2,120 applications to Israeli authorities for permits to cross Erez for relatives accompanying patients, including parents or other companions for children. 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 and all women under 45 years of age. In August, 43% were approved, 3% were denied and 54% had received no answer by the date of the patient's medical appointment.

Patients and companions cross Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 874 Gaza patients and 773 companions crossed Erez in August to access Palestinian or Israeli hospitals. 85 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance, with 81 companions. During the month, Erez crossing was open for 27 days for daytime working hours and closed on four days (Saturdays).

Rafah crossing – Egypt

The Rafah border terminal was open for six days during August after four consecutive months of closure beginning in April 2017. For two days exit was permitted for pilgrims only and for four days exit was permitted for pilgrims and humanitarian cases. 5,986 people exited to Egypt, among them 22 patients with 20 companions. 14 patients were transferred by ambulance with 18 companions.

No medical aid or medical delegates entered Gaza via Rafah during August. Since the beginning of 2017, the terminal was open for only 16 days during the year allowing 1,222 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.



An ambulance in Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt © WHO

In August, five cancer patients died while awaiting referral outside the Gaza Strip for health care.

Faten Ahmed , a 26-year-old woman with a rare form of cancer known as a primitive neuroectodermal tumour	Died while awaiting a security permit to travel for chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment not available in Gaza. She previously lost eight hospital appointments after applications for security approval to travel for health care: seven times due to administrative delays and once because she was denied access.
Kaenat Jaa’rur , a 43-year-old woman with ovarian cancer	Died while awaiting security permission to travel out of Gaza to access appropriate chemotherapy treatment. She had previously lost three hospital appointments because of delays in processing her application for a security permit that resulted in her having to have surgery in Gaza and chemotherapy treatment that is not first-line for her condition.
Nadia Hamad , a 53-year-old woman with breast cancer	Died while awaiting security permission for her to travel out of Gaza for palliative radiotherapy. She had previously lost four hospital appointments due to delays in receiving a security permit to travel
Itimad Rabi’e , a 44-year-old woman with colon cancer	Died the same day that she received permission to travel for second-line chemotherapy outside Gaza. She had previously lost two hospital appointments because of delays approving security permission for her to travel.
Muna Al-Aila , a 50-year-old woman with colon cancer	Died while awaiting financial approval from the SPU to access chemotherapy treatment outside Gaza. She had previously missed a hospital appointment because of administrative delays to getting security approval to travel.

Case study: Jihad, 24, misses nine appointments for treatment for Hodgkin’s lymphoma

Jihad is 24, married and has one child (Hussam, 14 months). He was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2016 when he was 23. He received 12 rounds of chemotherapy to treat his condition, starting in September 2016 after diagnosis and finishing in February 2017. Throughout his treatment and follow-up Jihad has not had access to adequate diagnostic imaging, or the options of radiotherapy and biological therapy considered for optimal treatment in certain cases of Hodgkin’s lymphoma. The full diagnostics and treatment options for Hodgkin’s lymphoma are not available in Gaza, and Jihad’s successive applications to Israeli security services to travel out of Gaza for diagnostics and treatment have been denied or delayed.

In August 2017, Jihad applied for the ninth time for a permit to access health care outside Gaza. A CT scan in May 2017 showed enlarged lymph nodes in his chest, and health staff need a PET scan imaging to check if the nodules represented recurrence of his disease. There are no PET scan facilities in Gaza, so Jihad was referred for full diagnostic imaging at Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv.



Before his diagnosis with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, Jihad worked as a laborer. However, the side effects of chemotherapy treatment made it difficult for Jihad to work and he has been unemployed since. After completing treatment, Jihad worked whenever he had the opportunity. However, like many men of his generation the continued blockade and difficult economic conditions in the Gaza Strip present significant obstacles to finding a secure job, with 58% of young people aged 15 to 24 years-old unemployed.

Since August 2017, patients with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in Gaza have faced additional barriers to accessing adequate treatment. Bleomycin, one of the four combination chemotherapy drugs used in the treatment of Hodgkin’s lymphoma in Gaza, has become unavailable, with complete depletion of stocks in the drug stores of the two cancer facilities in Gaza, the European Gaza Hospital in Rafah and the Rantisi Hospital in Gaza City. In the second quarter of 2017, 40% of drugs on the Essential Drugs List and 34% of equipment on the Essential Medical Disposables List were at zero-stock in Gaza’s Central Drug Store. For more information, see WHO’s Special Situation Report for Gaza: [click here](#)