
Richard Alldritt, Director General, Monitoring and Assessment

Mr John Glenister

27 July 2011

Dear Mr Glenister,

NHS WAITING TIMES STATISTICS

Thank you for your letter of 24 June 2011. I am sorry that it has taken some time to reply but we wanted to discuss it with experts in the Department of Health.

The Department of Health has given us the information enclosed and I hope this goes some way to explain the different sources that exist, both now and historically.

All of this does, as you say, emphasise the importance of explaining these issues clearly when the Department of Health publishes and uses the statistics. We are very grateful to you for pointing out the scope for misunderstanding and misuse and we will aim to keep watch for any instances that may require an intervention from the Statistics Authority.

Yours sincerely



Richard Alldritt

NOTE FROM STATISTICIANS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Prior to the introduction of 'Referral to Treatment' waiting times targets, the main waiting time measures were the 'stage of treatment' Inpatient and Outpatient waits. These measured the wait for Inpatient admission following a decision to admit (IP) and the wait for the first Outpatient appointment following GP referral (OP). In both instances the headline measure was a 'stock' measure providing a snapshot of the number of people who were still waiting at the end of a month and reporting their 'wait to date'.

In addition to these IP and OP waiting statistics, the Department of Health, and more recently the NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, produced waiting time statistics data on Hospital Episode Statistics (HES). The HES data focussed on the 'flow' of patients who had completed their wait in any given period. So the focus in HES was on completed waits rather than incomplete waits. The BBC article in 2009 by Michael Blastland draws on both the HES inpatient 'flow' data and the inpatient 'stock' data to show the different pictures that can emerge from looking at different parts of the same waiting time landscape.

An article in the Health Service Quarterly issue 24 from Winter 2004, looked at the two data sources and analysed the compatibility between them:
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/HSQ24.pdf

In more recent years the Department of Health has introduced the Referral to Treatment (RTT) waiting measure. The RTT data covers both the 'stock' of incomplete waits (those still waiting at the end of any given month) and the 'flow' of patients (those who have completed their wait during a given month). Data on RTT are collected and published each month. The data show the full distribution, in weekly timebands, of both those still waiting and those who have completed their wait. By publishing both views of the data Department of Health statisticians aim to convey a rounded picture of waiting times. For example the short waiters who do not wait over a month end will not appear in the 'stock' data but their wait *will* be captured in the 'flow' data.