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**Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation**Faye Kirkland  
(by email)

21 April 2017

Dear Faye

Thank you very much for your correspondence of 28 March outlining your concerns about the '12 hour trolley waits' statistics published by NHS England and supplementary data on '12 hour waits' you obtained from NHS Digital.

There are currently multiple measures of determining accident and emergency waiting times that are not always clearly explained and we believe there is scope to build more trust in the statistics. Whilst I am satisfied that there is no intention to mislead, there is a significant potential for confusion. We commend the work that is underway to improve the statistics and, once these steps are achieved, we will examine what further actions might be needed to develop the statistics in the future.

There are two monthly publications that present information about accident and emergency waiting times:

- *A&E Attendances and Emergency admissions*<sup>[1]</sup> published by NHS England; and
- *Provisional Accident and Emergency quality indicators*<sup>[2]</sup> published by NHS Digital.

We have reviewed these statistics for December 2016 and have been in touch with officials in both NHS England and NHS Digital to discuss the concerns. The publication titled *A&E Attendances and Emergency admissions* includes statistics about the numbers of people waiting over 12 hours from decision to admit to admission. *Provisional Accident and Emergency quality indicators* does not include information on 12 hour waits in accident and emergency, but officials from NHS Digital have told us that statistics on the length of time waited can be derived from their source data, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES). Officials at NHS Digital have published the data for 12 hour waits from arrival based on your request<sup>[3]</sup>.

The different publications have evolved to serve different user needs. But because both are on the same topic, this has potential to confuse users. Whilst the statistics do not set out to paint a comprehensive picture of the total number of patient

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<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/06/Monthly-AE-Report-December-16.pdf>

<sup>[2]</sup> <http://www.content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB23629>

<sup>[3]</sup> <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/suppinfiles>

episodes where people are still in the accident and emergency department 12 hours after arriving, there appears to be a clear user need for this information. And we agree that the current presentation of the statistics could be more helpful in distinguishing a 12 hour wait from *decision to admit* (the NHS England publication) from a 12 hour wait *from arrival* (derived from the NHS Digital data). Though there may be no intention to mislead, this distinction may appear confusing to the public, and needs to be more clearly explained.

More broadly, the Office for Statistics Regulation has set out our view that the coherence and value of health statistics should be improved. The main producers of these statistics have responded positively to our challenge<sup>[4]</sup>, including our recent letter about the leak of accident and emergency statistics<sup>[5]</sup>, and we look forward to seeing the outcome of work that is underway to improve the coherence of the statistics.

We are also aware of the difficulties of comparing the accident and emergency statistics across the UK, especially in the context of the nations differing health policies.

Whilst the statistical reports reference the comparative statistics from other administrations of the UK, we think that it is not easy for the less-expert user to compare the information about accident and emergency waiting times from England, with those from Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. The statistics published by NHS England do helpfully link to published information comparing accident and emergency waiting time statistics<sup>[6]</sup> from the four UK administrations and officials from NHS Digital have told us that they will also link to this analysis in future publications.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson

Annex: email from Faye Kirkland (personal contact details redacted)

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<sup>[4]</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/monitoring-and-assessment/monitoring/monitoring-work-programme/health-and-care-interventions/>

<sup>[5]</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Letter-from-Ed-Humpherson-to-Malcom-Grant-200217.pdf>

<sup>[6]</sup> <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/health-waiting-time-statistics/>

Dear Ed Humpherson

I have been looking at the way 12 hour trolley waits are calculated in England compared to the other nations of the UK. I work as a GP as well as an investigative journalist

I first looked at this in January 2016. Here is a link to the BBC article  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-35503631><http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-35503631>

In England NHS England produces data on the number of people who wait 12 hours in the A and E department after a doctor decides to admit them - this is the so called trolley wait.

However in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, they count the point at arrival from reception to 12 hours in the department.

The English data therefore does not include any patients that are transferred elsewhere or who are discharged home. A patient could be in the department for 20 hours, then a doctor decides to admit them, a bed found in 11 hours - so in the department for 31 hours and would not show up on NHS England figures.

The Royal College of Emergency Medicine called on NHS England to change the way they recorded so called 12 hour waits, they have repeatedly said this.

This is because international research has shown being in the department for 12 hours or more from arrival is associated with increased risks of death and adverse outcomes.

The then Shadow Health Secretary promised to ask questions about this. NHS England's response was the data could be requested from the HSCIC - now NHS digital.

Earlier this year on the 9th of January I a piece for the World at One, showing that the number of 12 hour waits from arrival had dramatically increased.

I have just got the data provisional for November, December and January.

As you will remember, NHS England says just 985 people waited 12 hours from a decision to admit in January, but the true number of people in the department 12 hours later was 47,969 patients.

From the public perspective 12 hour waits, would suggest 12 hours in the department.

This is the data from NHS Digital I received today on number of patient episodes where people were still in the department 12 hours after arriving (this is provisional)

Nov 2016	Dec 2016	Jan 2017
24,644	36,442	47,969

What does the UK Statistics Authority think about this?

Many thanks  
Faye Kirkland