

QUEENSLAND PUBLIC HOSPITAL  
SPECIALIST OUTPATIENT SERVICES

STATUS REPORT

1 MARCH 2006

Queensland public hospital outpatient services provide access to medical specialists without charge to the patient. They complement the arrangements with private specialists which are underwritten by Medicare.

Unfortunately, there is a significant gap between the Medicare rebate and what specialists charge. The latest data on billing practices, for the December quarter 2005, shows that the average gap for a patient-billed private specialist consultation around Australia was \$28. More than 70% of visits to private specialists in Queensland in 2004-05 involved an out-of-pocket payment, the highest percentage of any Australian state or territory (the Australian average is 64%). Ten years earlier, in 1994-95, only 30% of Queensland visits involved an out-of-pocket payment and at this time Queensland was better than corresponding national figure at the time (42%). This decrease in affordability is placing increased pressure on Queensland public hospital outpatient services and in 2003/04 Queensland provided 58 medical and surgical outpatient occasions of service per 100 population compared to the national average of 49 per 100.

As with the private sector, public hospital outpatient services are accessed by referral from general practitioners. Using information provided by the general practitioner in the referral letter, a specialist assigns a priority to each patient based on clinical need, a process known as 'triaging'. Patients with the highest priority are given appointments as soon as possible. Other patients, with less urgent needs, will have longer waits to see a specialist.

### ***Queensland Health Outpatient Reform Project***

Queensland Health will shortly commence a project designed to:

- Provide better information to general practitioners about waiting times at various outpatient clinics;
- Identify the information needed to undertake the triage process better;
- Identify the diagnostic tests to be provided;
- Develop more efficient methods of making referrals; and
- Develop a process to engage general practitioners better with hospital outpatient services.

In parallel with this project, a number of hospitals are examining innovative ways of improving access to outpatient services, particularly in orthopaedics.

### *March Survey*

In order to obtain better information about outpatient issues, a survey of Queensland public hospitals was undertaken to determine the number of patients waiting for a specialist outpatient appointment at 1 March 2006.

Results of the survey show there are over 80,000 people waiting for an outpatient appointment with a surgeon. A further 40,000 are waiting for a medical outpatient appointment.

How many of the 80,000 waiting for a surgical outpatient appointment may subsequently require surgery will not be known until the person has been assessed by the surgeon.

According to the independent Queensland Health Systems Review, up to 30% of surgical specialist outpatient appointments result in the patient being assessed as having a need for surgery. A large proportion of the remaining 70% assessed by a surgical specialist as not requiring surgery may be referred back to a GP for ongoing management of their condition, or continue within the outpatient service receiving non surgical treatment for their condition.

The outpatient booking list has grown 12% since July 2004 when the list was around 108,000 patients.

The number of patients waiting for an appointment needs to be seen in the context of the total number of outpatient occasions of service provided. In the last six months of 2005, Queensland public hospitals provided almost 800,000 specialist outpatient occasions of service.

The tables below identify the number of patients at each hospital waiting at 1 March 2006 for an appointment and the number of public specialist outpatients seen between July and December 2005 (preliminary data).

## SURGICAL OUTPATIENTS

<i>Facility</i>	<i>Surgical Outpatient Activity Jul to Dec 2005 (preliminary)</i>	<i>Surgical Patients Waiting at 1 March 2006</i>
Atherton Hospital	530	102
Beaudesert Hospital	613	29
Bundaberg Hospital	3,922	2,058
Caboolture Hospital	2,898	393
Cairns Base Hospital	13,836	3,967
Caloundra Hospital	1,974	49
Emerald Hospital	457	82
Gladstone Hospital	2,059	45
Gold Coast Hospital	25,742	6,557
Gympie Hospital	1,199	250
Hervey Bay Hospital	2,829	316
Innisfail Hospital	509	118
Ipswich Hospital	9,466	4,669
Kingaroy Hospital	265	112
Logan Hospital	10,526	2,228
Mackay Base Hospital	4,762	1,962
Maryborough Hospital	2,645	412
Mater Adult Hospital	12,636	3,304
Mater Children's Hospital	9,282	2,719
Mt Isa Hospital	1,489	498
Nambour Hospital	9,098	2,391
Princess Alexandra Hospital	38,442	9,748
QEI Hospital	14,459	1,561
Redcliffe Hospital	10,623	2,271
Redland Hospital	4,757	1,359
Rockhampton Hospital	8,879	3,979
Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital	34,274	15,032
Royal Children's Hospital	9,633	1,222
The Prince Charles Hospital	16,688	527
The Townsville Hospital	21,810	9,487
Toowoomba Hospital	10,860	5,478
<b>TOTAL SURGICAL OUTPATIENTS</b>	<b>287,162</b>	<b>82,925</b>

## MEDICAL OUTPATIENTS

<i>Facility</i>	<i>Medical Outpatient Activity Jul to Dec 2005 (preliminary)</i>	<i>Medical Patients Waiting at 1 March 2006</i>
Atherton Hospital	2,129	115
Beaudesert Hospital	1,006	11
Bundaberg Hospital	8,450	1,604
Caboolture Hospital	15,105	934
Cairns Base Hospital	31,162	1,137
Caloundra Hospital	974	12
Emerald Hospital	753	269
Gladstone Hospital	4,014	76
Gold Coast Hospital	25,020	3,109
Gympie Hospital	3,624	204
Hervey Bay Hospital	5,380	373
Innisfail Hospital	1,437	203
Ipswich Hospital	11,815	1,205
Kingaroy Hospital	1,938	59
Logan Hospital	23,629	3,304
Mackay Base Hospital	13,335	995
Maryborough Hospital	3,071	170
Mater Adult Hospital	7,503	2,997
Mater Children's Hospital	8,348	908
Mt Isa Hospital	4,760	524
Nambour Hospital	17,570	1,431
Princess Alexandra Hospital	64,123	4,218
QEI Hospital	5,386	939
Redcliffe Hospital	15,862	1,044
Redland Hospital	16,791	893
Rockhampton Hospital	12,312	1,646
Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital	118,448	4,720
Royal Children's Hospital	5,680	213
The Prince Charles Hospital	14,611	737
The Townsville Hospital	39,773	3,413
Toowoomba Hospital	21,937	1,796
<b>TOTAL MEDICAL OUTPATIENTS</b>	<b>505,946</b>	<b>39,259</b>