

Changes in the recording of waiting list information in Scotland and the impact on published Statistics

Introduction and background

1. Patients awaiting hospital inpatient/day case treatment in Scotland have their details held on waiting lists. A waiting list is primarily used to enable the hospital consultant and other hospital staff to manage the caseload of patients who are waiting their turn for treatment. A second purpose however is to provide information that allows the waiting times performance of the NHS to be monitored and open to public scrutiny.
2. Prior to 1 April 2003 there were two broad 'types' of hospital waiting list in Scotland. These were known as the *True Waiting List* (TWL) and the *Deferred Waiting List* (DWL) respectively. The TWL is the larger – on 31 December 2002 it had 85,000 patients on it. The TWL is essentially the list where the main reason for waiting is the availability of the necessary hospital resources (although the list also includes some patients whose time waiting for treatment may be partly affected by certain specific constraints arising from the patient's own circumstances e.g. where the patient was unavailable for treatment on a date offered by the hospital).
3. The DWL comprises patients where the patients' personal circumstances are significant factors in the length of time they need to wait. For example, if a patient was unavailable for treatment for a period because of some personal circumstance such as a medical condition which temporarily prevented their treatment, or because they had to look after a relative for a period of time. Patients on the DWL were taken off this list and treated, but the period of unavailability was a factor in their length of wait. On 31 December 2002 there were 24,000 patients on the DWL in Scotland.
4. The distinction between these two types of waiting list has been both practically difficult to administer consistently in NHSScotland and difficult to explain to the public. This is compounded by the fact that current definitions allowed for patients who were unavailable for treatment for personal reasons to be retained on the TWL but have a guarantee exception code applied to them – rather than be moved over to the DWL. Indeed several Trusts made only limited use of the DWL, preferring to keep patients on the TWL in this way. In the early part of 2002, Audit Scotland carried out a review of the management of waiting lists in Scotland and concluded that while there were no systematic or deliberate irregularities, there were some inconsistencies in the way some hospitals applied the definitions of the two waiting list types. Audit Scotland made recommendations in its report with the aim of improving the consistency and accuracy of recording. It also asked ISD to reconsider the rationale for the DWL to ensure patients on this waiting list category were not disadvantaged.
5. In September 2002, the Scottish Executive responded to the Audit Scotland report by publishing an Action Plan agreed with NHSScotland and ISD, which included specific actions to improve consistency of recording. In November 2002 the Minister for Health and Community Care announced his decision to move towards a single waiting list type **by 1 April 2003**. Trusts were asked to actively review patients on their DWL and merge these Lists with the TWL by 1 April 2003, effectively abolishing the Deferred Waiting List from that date.

6. In preparation for this significant change, ISD Scotland issued practical guidance to Trusts and has extended the existing waiting times guarantee exception codes (now renamed [Availability Status Codes](#) (ASC) – see Appendix A) to ensure that the reason for any delay in treating patients, whose circumstances would previously have placed them on the DWL, can be widely understood and uniformly reported on.
7. In practice, it takes time for hospitals to administer the changeover of patients from one list type to another. In a busy acute hospital it is not practicable to expect all patients to have their circumstances reviewed and details changed on a single day. Waiting lists are continually changing with new patients added and existing patients admitted for treatment every day. Trusts were asked to abolish the DWL, and review each individual case held on this list in the period up to 31 March 2003. Where it was not possible to review the exact circumstance of each case being placed on the DWL, Trusts were given until 30 September 2003 to ascertain this information and to ensure more specific recording of all cases thereafter.
8. The impact of this change was first seen in the published figures for 31 December 2003, when West Lothian NHS Trust transferred all of their 1,051 DWL patients to the one list. In the run up to the 1 April 2003 deadline, many more Trusts transferred patients to the TWL, with the 102,519 TWL and 5,038 DWL cases on 31 March 2003 reflecting the abolition of the DWL in a further 17 Trusts. At the 30 June 2003 census there will be a single waiting list type, but it is expected that for some people who had previously been on the DWL the precise reason for them being on this list type will not be available. By the 30 September 2003 census however, the circumstances of all patients waiting should be explicitly reported by NHSScotland on the national information returns, using the ASC only where this is appropriate.

The effect on National Statistics

9. In summary, important changes have been made to the recording of waiting list information within NHSScotland, changes that affect the waiting list statistics collected and published by ISD. These changes reflect, in part, the [Review of the Management of Waiting Lists in Scotland](#) Report by Audit Scotland, the subsequent Scottish Executive 'Action Plan', and the announcement shortly thereafter by the Minister for Health and Community Care that the deferred waiting list would be abolished by 1 April 2003.
10. As noted earlier, the administrative actions required within Trusts to implement the planned changes are such that they cannot be achieved on a single fixed date.
11. It is important to recognise that as waiting lists themselves are constantly changing as patients are admitted to hospital for treatment and new patients requiring treatment are added, it is not possible to predict exactly in advance the future size of the new combined waiting list.
12. In the descriptions below of the various factors that will determine the size of the waiting list at each census point, the phrase 'all else being the same' is used to acknowledge this uncertainty i.e. that not all factors affecting the size of the waiting list nationally can be anticipated in advance.

Detailed changes in recording of waiting list information

13. The changes arising from the Action Plan to take forward the recommendations in the Audit Scotland report 'Review of the Management of Waiting Lists in Scotland' and the decision to abolish the deferred waiting list by 1 April 2003 will result in discontinuities in the statistical trends for waiting lists. The changes and their impact are described in more detail below.

Changes arising from the SEHD Action Plan

14. An agreed Action Plan comprising a set of 21 action points was published in response to the Audit Scotland Report. These are detailed in Health Department Letter HDL(2002)70, and are available in full on the web at the following address: http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/sehd/mels/HDL2002_70.pdf.

15. The action points are quite wide ranging and it is difficult to quantify the combined effect on the reported statistics. It is however important to note that when fully implemented, some of them should lead to better compliance with national definitions and thus more consistent recording.

Changes arising from the abolition of the Deferred Waiting List

16. The Scottish Executive has advised NHSScotland that the DWL would be abolished on 1 April 2003. In order to meet this commitment NHS Trusts have been required to carry out a review of patients on the deferred waiting list in the period up to that date.

17. Following **review**, these patients will either be:

- added to the true waiting list and assigned an appropriate [Availability Status Code](#) (ASC). In such cases the patients will be included in the headline true waiting list number but will be excluded from those figures measuring progress towards the national waiting time standards, or
- added to the true waiting list *without* an ASC. In this case the patients will be included in the figures measuring progress towards the waiting time standards, or
- removed from the waiting list because, for example, they no longer require treatment.

18. Note that in some cases the NHS Trust may not have recorded the reason for the patient originally being added to the deferred waiting list. In these circumstances, patients will initially be added to the true waiting list with temporary ASC code 'X'. In such cases, further review must be completed by 30th September 2003, after which these patients will either remain on the waiting list (with or without a new *valid* ASC) or be removed from the list because, for example, they no longer require treatment. Cases with ASC 'X' will be included in the headline true waiting list number but excluded from figures used to monitor the national waiting time standards.

The impact of these changes on published figures

19. At the time of writing [Scottish Health Statistics](#) shows waiting list figures up to and including the waiting list census at 31 March 2003^a. The statistics shown are:

Indicator	Notes
Total number of patients on the true waiting list	The "headline" figure, i.e., total number of patients on the true waiting list, regardless of length of wait and guarantee status.
Number on true waiting list waiting over 12 months with a guarantee	This indicator monitors the Scottish Executive's current national standard that no patient, with a guarantee for treatment, will wait longer than 12 months for inpatient or day case treatment. Patients whose treatment has been delayed for reasons covered by an ASC are excluded from this figure ^b .
Number on true waiting list waiting over 9 months with a guarantee	This indicator monitors the Scottish Executive's national standard that by the end of 2003 no patient, with a guarantee for treatment, will wait longer than 9 months for inpatient or day case treatment. Patients whose treatment has been delayed for reasons covered by an ASC are excluded from this figure ^b .
Total number of patients on the deferred waiting list	

a. These can be viewed [here](#) (click on the *latest quarterly trends* option for figures for the last 16 quarters).

b. Prior to 1st November 2002, patients whose treatment had been delayed due to medical or social reasons were given 'Guarantee Exception Codes' (GEC). From 1st November 2002, these codes were reviewed and replaced by new '[Availability Status Codes](#)' (ASC). Patients with an ASC are excluded from the figures relating to national waiting time standards.

20. The table below summarises the factors impacting on these published indicators, and describes the anticipated effect on the statistics. [Note that the whilst the label 'True Waiting List' (or 'TWL') is used below, from the 1st April 2003 there is a combined waiting list in Scotland and the TWL label is from that date unnecessary.]

	December 2002	March 2003	June 2003	Later Censuses
Total on true waiting list	Changes due to the abolition of the deferred waiting list have been small at this census as the majority of trusts were not in a position to incorporate the required changes by this date.	Many trusts have transferred some or all patients from the deferred waiting list to the true waiting list (TWL). The TWL at 31 December was nearly 85 thousand and this has risen to over 100 thousand at this census.	The deferred waiting list no longer exists from 1 April and this is the first census after its abolition. The remaining patients on the deferred waiting list at 31 March should have transferred to the true waiting list (TWL) on 1 April. The census at 30 June is therefore likely to show another increase in the TWL , all else being the same. Note that many of the patients transferred from the deferred to the TWL will be assigned an appropriate ASC code and should be excluded from statistics that report progress against national waiting times standards.	The only further change during 2003/04 is the removal of ASC code 'X' as a legitimate code for national processing after September 2003. This is unlikely to directly affect any of the indicators listed here.

	All Censuses
Number on true waiting list waiting over 9/12 months with a guarantee	These indicators will comprise cases, as now, whose circumstances are such that they have not been assigned an ASC code in accordance with national rules and definitions. This includes patients previously on the deferred list who after review by the hospital are not assigned an ASC code. Most patients transferred from the deferred waiting list are likely however, to be given the appropriate ASC code relating to their circumstances. Such patients will <u>not</u> be included with the indicator. For this reason these indicators are expected to be largely unaffected by the known changes.

	December 2002	March 2003	June 2003	Later Censuses
Total on deferred waiting list	Changes due to the abolition of the deferred waiting list have been small at this census.	For the reasons described above for the true waiting list, the number on the deferred list has fallen from nearly 24 thousand at the December 2002 census to 5 thousand at this census.	No longer applicable - the deferred list is abolished on 1 April 2003.	No longer applicable

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APPENDIX A

Availability Status Codes (ASC)

- 2 Where the patient has asked to delay admission for personal reasons or has refused a reasonable offer of admission.
- 3 In individual cases where, after discussion with the patient, the treatment has been judged of low clinical priority.
- 4 With highly specialised treatments identified at the time of placing the patient on the waiting list.
- 8 Where the patient did not attend nor give any prior warning.
- 9 In circumstances of exceptional strain on the NHS such as a major disaster, major epidemic or outbreak of infection, or service disruption caused by industrial action.
- A Patients under medical constraints (condition other than that requiring treatment), which affected their ability to accept an admission, date if offered.
- X Temporary code – valid until September 2003 – patients transferred from the DWL for whom the reason for their being on the DWL was not known.