

MEDIA RELEASE

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Public wait list blow-out highlights advantages of private health

Public hospital wait lists have blown out to an unprecedented 324,000 Australians, for painful and debilitating conditions such as cataracts, ear, nose and throat surgeries, hip and knee replacements.

The rapidly growing public hospital backlog has made the benefits of private health insurance, more apparent than ever.

Triggered by the national elective surgery restrictions imposed at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the expanding public wait list has caused a significant rise in surgery eligibility checks with private insurers.

Matthew Koce, CEO of Members Health Fund Alliance – industry peak body of 27 not-for-profit and members owned funds – said there has never been a more important time than now to have private health cover.

“This COVID-19 legacy is causing enormous pain, suffering and hardship on hundreds-of-thousands of Australians on public wait lists whose surgery has been delayed well beyond the clinically recommended timeframes,” said Mr Koce.

“Delayed access to care can result in dependence on opioid pain killers, increased complexity of surgery down the track and trigger all sorts of other health issues that further impact quality of life. These are people who cannot see properly due to cataracts, people who cannot walk because their hips or knees need to be replaced or women in pain due to endometriosis.”

State health authorities have reported unprecedented wait list blow outs in the key states of New South Wales up 20%, Western Australia up 19.2% and Victoria up 41% compared to the previous year.

“The National Wait List may be even higher as most states have failed to provide any elective surgery data since June and the Queensland Health Minister suspended public hospital performance reporting back in February,” said Mr Koce.

“It may take more than two years to clear the massive public hospital backlog and return to pre-pandemic levels. People with private health cover, on the other hand, are guaranteed to get the care they need, from the doctor of their choice, as quickly as possible.”

“No matter what your stage of life, private health insurance has enormous value,” said Mr Koce. “The last thing a younger person would want is to miss out on the best part of their life because they are languishing in pain on a public hospital waiting list for two or more years.

The National Wait List backlog is opening the surgery floodgates for private health funds who report an 8-10% increase in enquiries, the highest since 2002 when the Federal Government stepped in with major private health sector reforms.

“More than 2.3 million people are admitted for elective surgery each year in Australia, with more than 60 per cent of those procedures taking place in a private hospital,” said Mr Koce.

In stark contrast to negative trend for the larger insurers, Members Health funds, are motivated by people not profits and continue to record consistent growth driven by younger policyholders. Members Health funds have 270,000 more people insured on hospital treatment policies today compared with June 2016. The rest of the industry has 400,000 fewer.

“Private health insurance guarantees timely access to a wide range of doctors and specialists, private hospitals and services. It allows people to avoid public hospital waiting lists and in doing so, takes strain off of the public system.”

Members Health is the peak industry body for an alliance of 27 health funds that are not-for-profit or part of a member-owned group, region or community. They all share the common ethic of putting their members' health before profit and represent the interests of more than 3.7 million Australians.

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Public Hospital Waiting List Growth during COVID-19

New South Wales¹

- Total elective surgical procedures performed between April and June 2020 was 35,807, down 39.4% (23,305) compared with the same quarter the previous year.
- The number of people on the waiting list at the end of the quarter was up 20.1% (16,895) to 101,026 compared with the same period last year.
- The median waiting times for elective surgical procedures performed were:
 - 10 days for urgent procedures (down one day)
 - 50 days for semi-urgent procedures (up four days)
 - 301 days for non-urgent procedures (up 55 days).

More than 8/10 procedures (84.7%) performed within clinically recommended times frames, down 11.7 percentage points

Victoria²

- Total elective surgical procedures performed between April and June 2020 was 30,804, down 39.8% (20,346) compared with the same quarter the previous year.
- The number of people on the waiting list at the end of the quarter was up 41% (16,196) to 56,039 compared with the same period last year.
- The median waiting times for elective surgical procedures performed were:
 - 8 days for urgent procedures (down two days)
 - 62 days for semi-urgent procedures (up 18 days)
 - 117 days for non-urgent procedures (up 49 days).

More than 9/10 procedures (92.2%) performed within clinically recommended times frames, down 2.2 percentage points

Western Australia³

- Total elective surgical procedures performed between May to July 2020 was 19,635, down 16.8% (3,957) compared with the same three months in the previous year.
- The number of people on the waiting list at the end of July 2020, across all categories, was up 19.2% (4,691) to 29,137 compared with July 2019.
- The median waiting times for elective surgical procedures performed in July 2020 were:
 - 11 days for urgent procedures (down one day compared with July 2019)
 - 39 days for semi-urgent procedures (up 4 days compared with July 2019)
 - 161 days for non-urgent procedures (up 49 days compared with July 2019).
- More than 8/10 procedures (88%) performed within clinically recommended times frames in July 2020, down 6 percentage points compared with July 2019.

Tasmania⁴

Limitations: Tasmanian Government does not provide year on year comparisons data. Latest data as at March 2020.

- Total elective surgical procedures performed between January and March 2020 was 3,854.
- The number of people on the waiting list at the end of March 2020, across all categories, was 11,307.
- The median waiting times for elective surgical procedures performed in March 2020 were:
 - 19 days for urgent procedures
 - 147 days for semi-urgent procedures
 - 285 days for non-urgent procedures
- Just over 5/10 procedures (56%) performed within clinically recommended times frames in March 2020.

Queensland⁵

Limitations: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Queensland Government has suspended public reporting of hospital performance until further notice. Figures below are current as at February 2020.

- Total elective surgical procedures performed in February 2020 was 12,245, up 4% compared with January 2020.
- The number of people on the waiting list at the end of February was 55,948.
- The median waiting times for elective surgical procedures performed in February were:
 - 16 days for urgent procedures
 - 70 days for semi-urgent procedures
 - 250 days for non-urgent procedures.
- More than 9/10 procedures (98%) were performed within clinically recommended times frames

Sources:

1. NSW Bureau of Health Information, *Activity and Performance Report*, April to June 2020: https://www.bhi.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/603567/BHI_HQ_APR-JUN_2020_Report.pdf
2. Victorian Agency for Health Information, Elective Surgery Quarterly Data: <https://vahi.vic.gov.au/reports/victorian-health-services-performance/elective-surgery>
3. Western Australia Department of Health, Elective Surgery Wait List Reports monthly data, at July 2020: <https://www2.health.wa.gov.au/Reports-and-publications/Elective-Surgery-Wait-List-ESWL-reports>
4. Tasmania Department of Health, Health Stats, Elective Surgery Admissions, Waiting List, Admitted Median Wait Time: <https://www.healthstats.dhhs.tas.gov.au/healthsystem>
5. Queensland Health Hospitals Reporting, Elective Surgery monthly data: <http://www.performance.health.qld.gov.au/Hospital/ElectiveSurgery/99999>

***Note:** Other States and Territories either do not have comparable datasets or have not updated Elective Surgery datasets for some time.