



MONTHLY REPORT

August 2020

Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **6,593**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

949 Gaza

5,570 West Bank

 **192**

Gaza patients exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez for healthcare

155

Gaza patient companions exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez



No comprehensive data available for West Bank patient and companion permit applications

following suspension to functioning of Civil Affairs Office; 889 permits approved for patients to access Augusta Victoria Hospital

 **3**

Gaza patients called for security interrogation

IN FOCUS

Saja, a 9 year old girl, delayed access to the treatment she needs

Part 1 Referrals

August Referrals by the Ministry of Health


In August, the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 6,593 referrals to non-MoH facilities. A greater proportion of referrals were for patients from the West Bank in the context of continued restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and obstacles to the coordination of permits. West Bank referrals comprised 84% (5,570) of all MoH referrals (the West Bank population comprises approximately 60% of the population in the oPt), including 846 for patients from Jerusalem, with Gaza referrals accounting for 14% (949). Meanwhile, two referrals were for Palestinian patients in Jordan and the origin of 72 referrals was not reported.

After an almost 40% reduction in West Bank referrals from March to April 2020, by June 2020 West Bank referrals had recovered to the pre-COVID-19 level. In August, there were 5,570 referrals compared to a monthly average of 5,133 referrals for the first quarter of 2020. By contrast, in the Gaza Strip the substantial 58% reduction in the monthly number of referrals from March to April 2020 has persisted. The number of referrals from the Gaza Strip in August (949) represents a 62% reduction in referrals compared to the monthly average for the first quarter of 2020 (2,481). Movement restrictions and the end to permits coordination, which has disproportionately affected the Gaza Strip, may be contributing factors to the inequity in referrals issued by the MoH.

The proportion of all Palestinian MoH referrals destined for hospitals within the West Bank, outside East Jerusalem, increased from 40% in the first quarter of 2020 – prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in the oPt – to 53% in August. Referrals within the Gaza Strip increased from 7% to 9%. Referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals have decreased from 41% to 33%; to Israeli hospitals from 5% to 4%; and to Egypt from 6% to 1%. Referrals to Jordan comprised 0.3% of the total in August. The top needed specialties for referrals were oncology (23%); urology (12%); nephrology (12%); cardiac catheterization (8%); cardiology (6%); ophthalmology (5%); and radiotherapy (5%).

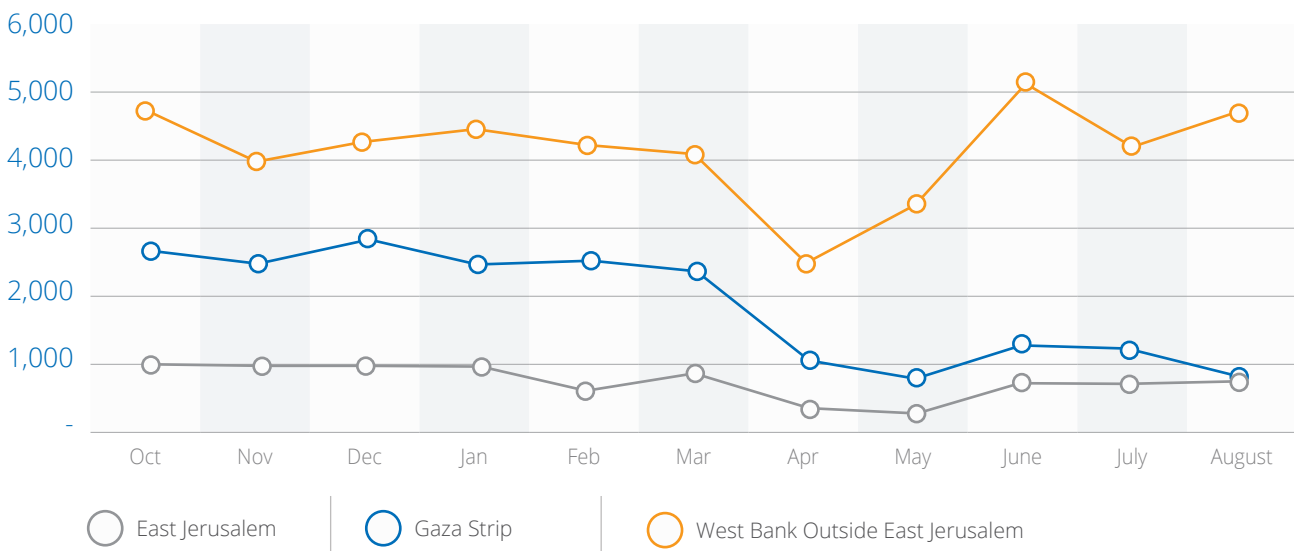
Referrals for patients under 18 years of age comprised 19% (1,250) of the total, while 30% (1,968) were for those aged 60 years or older. Referrals for female patients comprised 46% of the total.

 **949**
Gaza Strip

 **5,570**
West Bank

referrals approved financial coverage for healthcare outside the Palestinian Ministry of Health

Chart 1 Number of referrals issued by the Palestinian MoH by place of origin, October 2019 to August 2020



Part 2 Access

The Gaza Strip

Since May 2020, the Health Liaison Office of the Palestinian MoH has ceased coordination of permit applications and the movement of patients, companions, and ambulances. Several organizations have intervened to assist patients and their companions. Table 1 provides data on permit approvals for patients obtained by different organizations involved in facilitating coordination during the month. There were 216 permits approvals. Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) and Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) also recorded the total number of applications. AVH had 86 out of 161 (53%) of patient permit applications approved during the month, with the remainder either pending decision at the end of the month, delayed or denied. Meanwhile, PHRI had 35 of 41 (85%) of patient permit applications approved during August.



216

recorded approvals
for patient permits

Organization applied	# of applications	# Approved
Augusta Victoria Hospital	161	86
Makassed Hospital	**	43
St. John Hospital	8	3
International Committee of the Red Cross	**	49
Physicians for Human Rights - Israel	41	35
Total	**	216

** Missing data

Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) submitted 161 requests for Gaza patients, of whom 86 (53%) were approved and 75 (47%) were either pending decision at the end of August, delayed (meaning no definitive response by the date of their hospital appointment) or denied. 15 patients of the 86 approved were transferred by ambulance.

St. John Hospital received 3 patients from the Gaza Strip. 2 for admission and 1 for outpatient clinic.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) coordinated the exit of 49 (M: 24; F: 25) patients during the month of August. 17 children and 32 adults. All of them were referred as urgent cases.

Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) made 41 patient permit applications: 25 for adult patients and 16 for child patients. PHRI applied for permits for 19 adult companions and 16 child companions. For adult patient permit applications, 22 out of 25 (88%) were approved, 2 (8%) were denied and 1 (4%) delayed. For child patient permit applications, 13 of the 16 (81%) were approved and 3 (19%) denied. Of the 41 patients, 22 had appointments in East Jerusalem Hospitals, 15 in the West Bank and 4 in Israeli hospitals. 21 (51%) applications were for oncology patients. Of 41 patient applications 35 (85%) were approved, 5 were denied and 1 remained pending an answer.

Security interrogation

In August, 3 patients among those appealing through PHRI were requested for security interrogation by Israeli services. Two interviews were conducted over the phone, while one patient was required to attend for interrogation at Erez on his return to Gaza after receiving radiotherapy.

Patient companions

Not all partners were able to provide data on companion applications and approvals, though the majority of patients traveled with a companion.

PHRI made 35 companion permit applications during August: 19 for adult companions and 16 for child companions. All child patient applications were matched with companions, with the same outcomes: 13 of 16 (81%) were approved and 3 (19%) denied. For adult companion applications, 12 out of the 19 were approved (63%), 5 denied (26%) and 2 (11%) delayed, receiving no definitive response by the date of the patient's appointment.

Patients and companions crossing Beit Hanoun/Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 192 Gaza patients and 155 companions crossed Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint in August to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of these, 27 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 26 companions. During the month, Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint was open for 26 days for daytime working hours and closed on 5 days (5 Saturdays).



3

patients
called for security
interrogation



192

patients
crossed Beit Hanoun/
Erez for healthcare



155

patient companions
patient companions
crossed Beit Hanoun/
Erez



Rafah crossing - Egypt



In August, there were 1,851 entries and 1,142 exits by persons through Rafah border crossing. 95 persons who attempted to cross were denied exit from the Gaza Strip by Egyptian authorities. No data was available on crossings for health purposes. The terminal was open both directions for 3 days (11, 12, and 13). It was also open in three other occasions to return the bodies of deceased persons and their companions. A total of 7 bodies of deceased Gaza residents were returned from Egypt during the month.

The West Bank

In August, an unknown number of applications were submitted to Israeli authorities for permits for patients and their companions from the West Bank.

In the context of the permits system imposed by Israel, and following suspension of coordination of permit applications between Palestinian and Israeli authorities on 19 May, patients and companions from the West Bank are no longer able to apply through the Palestinian Civil Affairs Office for permits to enter East Jerusalem and Israel and instead have been applying directly to Israeli authorities present in the West Bank and through hospitals. Currently, there is no comprehensive data available for patient and companion permit applications to Israeli authorities.

Of health service providers, Augusta Victoria Hospital reported the submission of 893 permit applications for patients living in the West Bank to reach its services during August. Of these, 889 patient permits were approved.

St John Hospital reported that 1,089 West Bank patients (171 in-patients; 918 out-patients) reached its services.

Physicians for Human Rights Israel reported requesting permits for 2 patients and 1 companion during August. All were male. One application was for a cancer patient and the other was for a patient who needs orthopaedic surgery. One patient application was denied; the application of the other patient and the companion were delayed.



No comprehensive data available for West Bank patient and companion permit applications following suspension to functioning of Civil Affairs Office;

889 patient permits were recorded as approved for travel to Augusta Victoria Hospital. A further 1,089 West Bank patients were reported to have reached St John Hospitals in East Jerusalem.

In Focus

Saja, a 9-year-old girl, delayed access to the treatment she needs

Saja is a 9-year-old girl who was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia in May 2019.

She needs a bone marrow transplant, not available in the Gaza Strip, and has not been able to access the treatment she needs since March 2020.

Saja's mother is from Morocco, and she was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia during a family visit to Rabat, Morocco, in May 2019. Saja received her initial chemotherapy in Rabat, before returning home to Gaza in February 2020 to continue her treatment and undergo bone marrow transplantation in the occupied Palestinian territory.



An initial appointment was scheduled for 22 March 2020 at An-Najah Hospital in Nablus, in the West Bank, but the hospital only offers autologous transplantation (using the patient's own bone marrow), while Saja needed an allogeneic transplant (with bone marrow from a donor). Saja was rescheduled an appointment at Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, but again the hospital could only offer autologous transplantation. Eventually, on 15 July 2020, Saja received an appointment to attend the King Hussein Cancer Centre in Jordan, however she was unable to exit to Jordan because of the border closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After a delay of around six weeks, Saja was scheduled for an appointment at Tel Hashomer, an Israeli hospital east of Jaffa, for 6 September. However, Israeli authorities advised the family to change her companion since her mother doesn't have a Palestinian ID. The family appealed the decision in the Israeli civil courts through Physicians for Human Rights Israel, after rearranging her hospital appointment to 15 September. On 14 September, Saja's appeal was upheld; she was finally able to travel for treatment the next day.

Throughout efforts to refer Saja for bone marrow transplant, she has been receiving chemotherapy at Rantisi Hospital in Gaza City. Her mother, Najlaa, commented, "We are from Rafah, and the journey from Rafah to Gaza takes about an hour. At times we've had to attend Rantisi Hospital every other day. It's exhausting and putting a strain on us physically and financially."

Saja's health has been deteriorating in recent months, as she suffered the effects of leukaemia. Admitted to Rantisi Hospital before hearing the result of her appeal, she had needed platelets but faced severe delays with the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip. Even relatives who had been willing to travel to donate platelets for her had not been able to reach the hospital due to the movement restrictions in place.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, just as outside it, no patient should be delayed or prevented from accessing the healthcare they need.

58-year-old patient dies en route to receiving healthcare

Mohammed, a 58-year-old man from Rafah in the south of Gaza Strip, died on the Israeli side of Erez checkpoint during his ambulance transfer on 13 August 2020. Mohammed had acute myeloid leukemia and was travelling for an appointment for bone marrow analysis and potential transplant treatment at An-Najah National University Hospital in Nablus, in the West Bank.

Mohammed's transfer from Rantisi Hospital in Gaza City was coordinated by the ICRC. While being transferred by ambulance, however, his condition started to deteriorate. After a wait of approximately 20 minutes for Israeli approval to drive through the terminal, Mohammed had a cardiac arrest. The crew of the Palestine Red Crescent Society ambulance tried their best to resuscitate him, but their efforts were not successful. Mohammed died and his body was returned to Gaza.