



The Referral Abroad Department in Gaza, October 2015 ©WHO

## Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 6 (July 29, 2016)

### Summary: June 2016

#### Erez crossing

- **3 in 10 patients denied or delayed Gaza exit:** Of 2,105 applications for permits submitted by patients to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in June, 69.31% were approved. 209 patients (9.93%) were denied, including 6 children and 10 elderly persons over 60 years. 437 patients (20.76%) received no response to their applications, including 135 children and 45 elderly people over 60 (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **Security interrogations:** 39 patients, among them 12 females, were requested for General Security Services interviews at Erez during June. Two were approved permits. (page 6)
- **Companions hindered from obtaining permits:** Approval rate for patient companions' permit applications was 58%, a slight increase after women aged 46 to 55 were exempted from extra security procedures. (page 5)
- **Infant's father returning to Gaza arrested at Erez.** (page 7)
- **One-third of humanitarian health workers denied access through Erez.** (page 7)

#### Rafah exit

- **Border open briefly during June:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open for 6 days during the month allowing 377 people to travel for health reasons to Egypt including 30 patients transferred by ambulance. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza through Egypt during the month.

#### Ministry of Health referrals in May

- The Ministry of Health referred 1,883 **patients** in June to outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 9,738,936**. Referrals to Gaza non-MoH facilities sharply declined in the last 3 months. The top 5 needed procedures for Gaza patients were in oncology, hematology, paediatrics, orthopaedics, and ophthalmology.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients<sup>1</sup>

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,883 referrals<sup>1</sup> for Gaza patients in June, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), 5% lower than the monthly average in 2015.

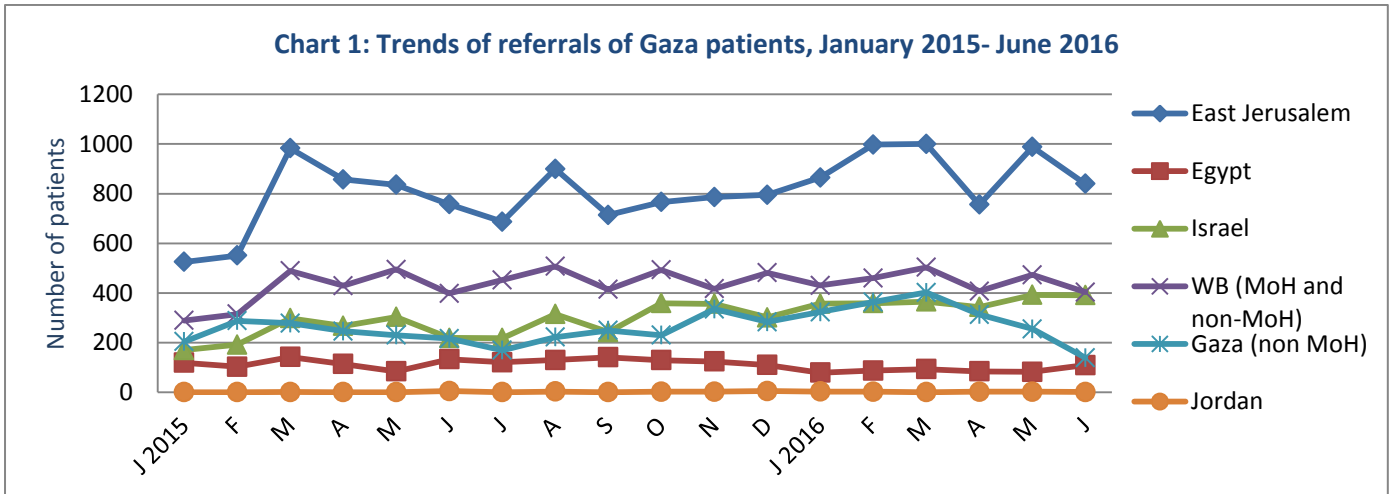
Most referrals were to East Jerusalem hospitals (44.61%); the remaining were to West Bank hospitals (21.4%), Israeli hospitals (20.76%) and to medical centers within Gaza (7.38%). Referrals to Egypt (5.79%) rose slightly due to Rafah terminal opening in June and waiting patients encouraged to renew their referrals for possible travel.

Referral Destination	2015 monthly average	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	Total 2016
Gaza (non-MoH)	251	323	363	402	313	255	139	1,795
WB (MoH / non-MoH)	477	430	460	503	407	473	403	2,676
East Jerusalem	809	865	998	1,000	756	988	840	5,447
Jordan	3	3	2	0	2	2	1	10
Israel	312	357	359	365	343	392	391	2,207
Egypt	139	79	84	93	84	82	109	534
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,991</b>	<b>2,057</b>	<b>2,269</b>	<b>2,363</b>	<b>1,905</b>	<b>2,192</b>	<b>1,883</b>	<b>12,669</b>

Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, June 7, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Compared to May, referrals decreased to all destinations except Egypt. Referrals to private and non-governmental facilities within Gaza continued to decrease (**Table 1** and **Chart 1**). Dr. Bassam Al-Badri, the head of the referral office in Gaza, said that the decrease in local referrals was due to the Ministry of Health's recent supply from the West Bank to the central drug store in Gaza of medical disposables for heart catheterization, including regular and medicated stents. Also most lithotripsy cases can now be performed in MoH facilities as well.

45.99% of referrals issued for Gaza patients were for females while 54.01% were for males. 31.34% of all referrals were for children under the age of 18; 18.32% were for elderly patients over 60 years old.



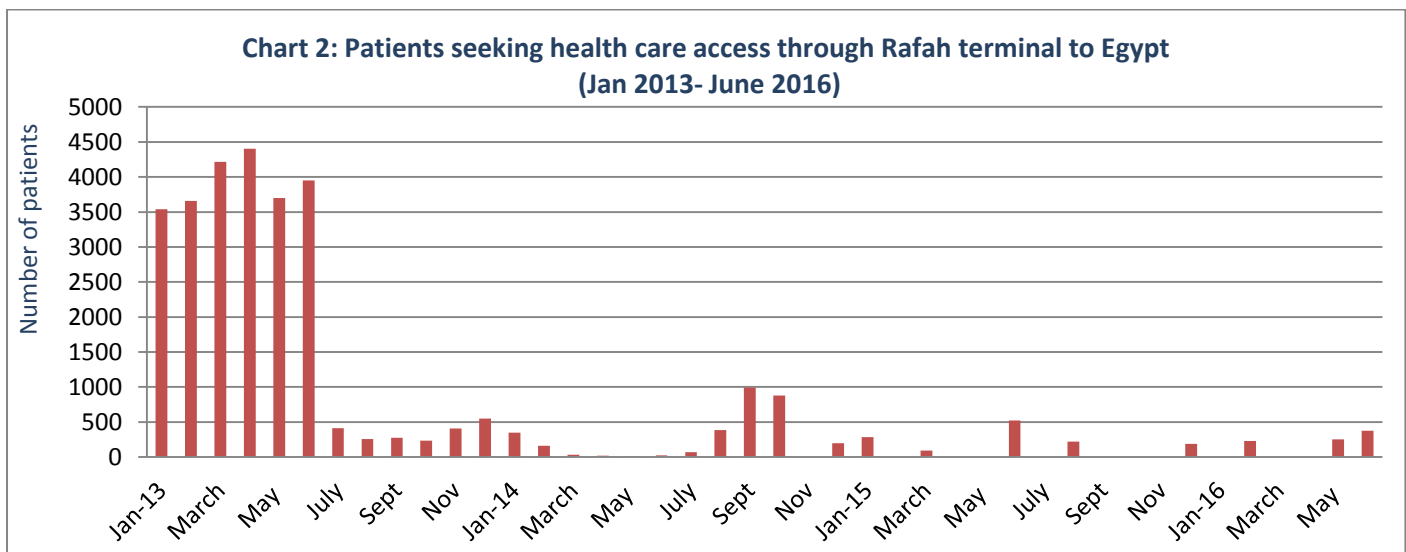
The specialties needed for Gaza referrals were mainly: oncology - 451 referrals (23.95%), hematology - 168 (8.92%), pediatrics - 127 (6.74%), orthopedics - 124 (6.59%), ophthalmology - 122 (6.48%), nuclear medicine - 113 (6%), MRI - 87 (4.62%), neurosurgery - 65 (3.45%), internal medicine - 64 (3.4%), urology - 57 (3.03%). The remaining 505 (26.82%) were for 21 other specialties. The Referral Directorate in Ramallah reported an estimated cost of NIS 9,738,936 for the 1,883 referrals for Gaza patients in June.

<sup>1</sup> The referral data used in the WHO monthly reports since October 2015 is obtained from the Ministry of Health Medical Referral Directorate in Ramallah and reflect the number of financial decisions for Gaza patients, and not the number of actual patients. The data includes renewals of referrals for Gaza patients to Egypt who are still waiting for access through Rafah, approvals for additional financial coverage needed for in-patients in hospital, and special additional referrals.

## ACCESS

Of the 1,883 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in June, 1,635 (86.8%) required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 109 (5.78%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and required the Rafah border to be accessible).

**Limited access to Egypt during June:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open on 6 days during June allowing 4,790 travellers to exit to Egypt, among them 377 who reported they were travelling for health reasons. 30 were transferred by ambulances with 30 companions. No medical delegates or medical aid entered Gaza during the month. In the first half of 2016, the Rafah crossing was open a total of only 11 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 748 patients (110 by ambulance) to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons (**Chart 2**).

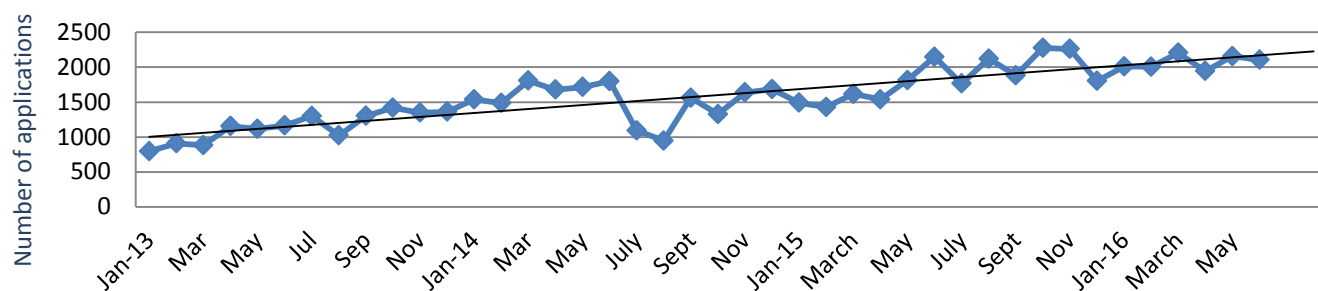


Source: Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal.

**Access through Erez crossing:** In June, there were 2,105 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care (55.96% males and 44.04% females). 30.74% were applications for children under 18 years and 16.48% were for elderly people above 60. Permit applications submitted this month were mainly for patients who need health care in: oncology, 479 (22.76%), ophthalmology, 218 (10.36%), cardiology, 182 (8.65%), orthopedics, 180 (8.55%), hematology, 161 (7.65%), pediatrics, 148 (7.03%), neurosurgery, 124 (5.89%), nuclear medicine, 101 (4.8%), general surgery, 69 (3.28%) and internal medicine 66 (3.14%). The remaining 377 applications (17.91%) were for 21 other specialties.

Of the total permit applications, 1,063 (50.5%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, 570 (27.08%) to the West Bank, 467 (22.19%) to Israel, and 5 (0.24%) to Jordan. The top receiving hospitals in June were Makassed, 512 (24.32%), Augusta Victoria, 362 (17.2%), Najah University in Nablus, 179 (8.5%), Tel-Hashomir (Israel) 139 (6.6%), St. John hospital, 134 (6.37%), Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron, 120 (5.7%), Hadassah (Israel), 118 (5.61%), Msalam center, 83 (3.94%), Ichilov (Israel), 65 (3.09%) and St. Joseph hospital in Jerusalem 55 (2.61%). The remaining 338 (16.06%) were to 31 other hospitals and medical centers.

**Chart 3: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez, January 2013 - June 2016**



The total number of permit applications in June was 16% higher than the monthly average in 2015 (1,845). In the past 3 years (**Chart 3**) there has been a trend toward higher demand for access to health care through Erez due to lack of resources in the health system in Gaza and blocked access to Egypt, especially for private patients.

In June, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 1,459 (69.31%) applications for permits for patients were approved (**Table 2**), 7.35% lower than the monthly average in 2015 (76.66%). 209 applicants (9.93%) were denied access. 437 (20.76%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Permit applications should be submitted to the Israeli District Liaison Office 7-10 days prior to the hospital appointment date. In June, out of the total 2,105 applications from patients with hospital appointments scheduled during the month, 291 (13.82%) were submitted less than a week before the referral hospital appointment date, 664 (31.54%) applications were submitted 8-14 days before the appointment, 1,106 (52.54%) were 15-30 days before, and 38 (1.81%) were submitted more than 30 days before the hospital appointment. 6 applications (0.29%) were not accounted for.

**Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, June 2016**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	76	117	60	98	0	0	16	19	0	0
4 - 17	183	271	148	200	1	5	34	66	0	1
18- 40	275	291	167	130	44	75	64	86	10	13
41 - 60	241	304	176	188	16	58	49	58	2	10
Over 60	152	195	134	158	2	8	16	29	0	3
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>1178</b>	<b>685</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2105</b>		<b>1459 (69.31%)</b>		<b>209 (9.93%)</b>		<b>437 (20.76%)</b>		<b>39 (1.85%)</b>	

\* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH –Gaza

**Table 3** shows that total patient permit applications in June 2016 were 2% lower than the corresponding month in 2015 and the approval rate was 10.76% lower. The denial rate was 3.4% higher in June 2016 and delayed rate was 7.35% higher. In the first half of the 2016, the volume was higher but denial rate almost double that in the corresponding period in 2015. The number of patients requested for security interview in the same period was 4 times higher in 2016.

**Table 3: Israeli District Liaison Office decisions on permit requests to cross Erez, by response, and sex of applicant, 2016 compared to 2015**

Period	June 2015		June 2016		January - June 2015		January-June 2016	
Total	2,148 (F:979; M:1169)		2,105 (F:927; M:1,178)		10,034 (F:4,641; M:5,393)		12,427 (F:5,773;M:6,654)	
Approved	1,720 (F:831; M:889)	80.07%	1,459 (F:685; M:774)	69.31%	8206 (F:3,989; M:4,217)	81.78%	8,785 (F:4,335;M:4,450)	70.69%
Denied	140 (F:36; M:104)	6.52%	209 (F:63; M:146)	9.93%	345 (F:73; M:272)	3.44%	803 (F:250;M:553)	6.46%
Delayed	288 (F:112; M:176)	13.41%	437 (F:179; M:258)	20.76%	1,483 (F:579; M:904)	14.78%	2,839 (F:1,188;M:1,651)	22.85%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	10 (F:0;M:10)	0.47%	39 (F:12; M:27)	1.85%	98 (F:24; M:74)	0.98%	496 (F:172;M:324)	3.99%

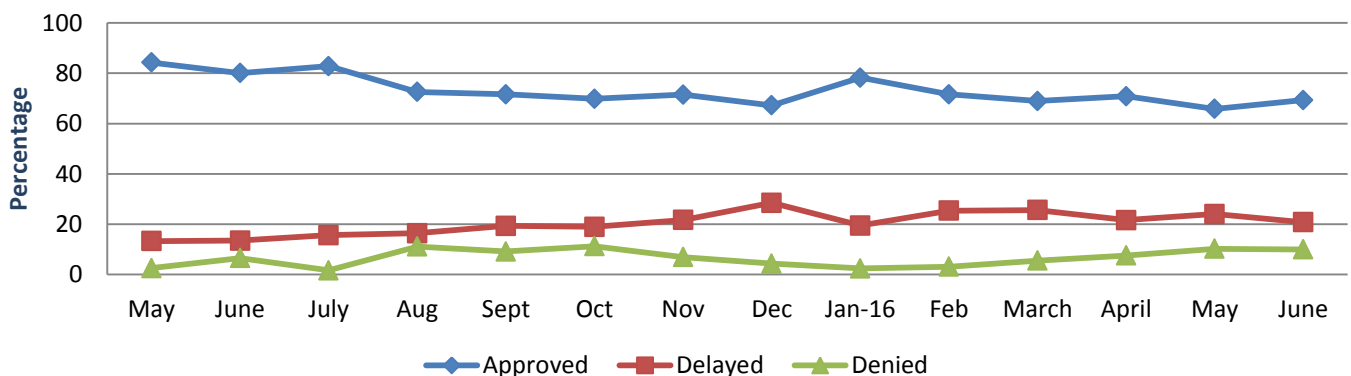
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Chart 4** shows a decline after July 2015 in Israeli approvals for patients' permit applications and an increase in delays. The decline in approval rate has been a trend in 2016 since January which had the highest approval rate this year (78.22%). Delays were higher in 2016 compared to the 2015 average, possibly due to an increase in GSS requests for security interviews. Denials have been increasing since the beginning of the year.



The process of applying for a permit is time-consuming for the patient and complicated, sometimes requiring multiple attempts which delays health care. The patient must have a valid financial commitment from the Palestinian MoH and documentation of an appointment from the receiving hospital. If the validity of either expires before the patient receives a permit, the application process must be repeated. Patients sometimes reapply after being denied a permit, or if the treatment is urgent and no response has been received. June data showed that out of the 2,105 applications submitted in the Palestinian coordination office, 202 (9.6%) were repeat applications for patients: 4th attempt for 1 patient, 3rd attempt for 21 patients, and 2nd attempt for 180 patients.

**Chart 4: 12 months trend of Israeli responses to patients' permit applications, May 2015-June 2016 (%)**



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

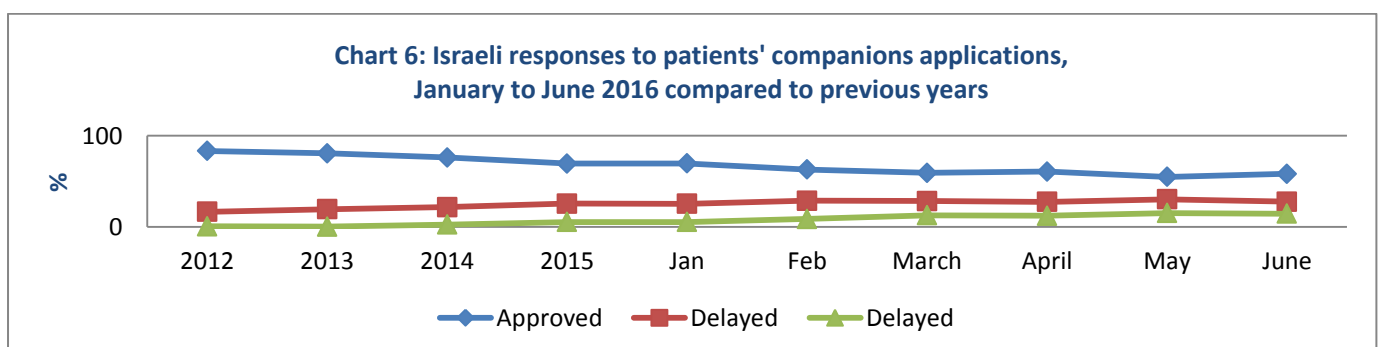
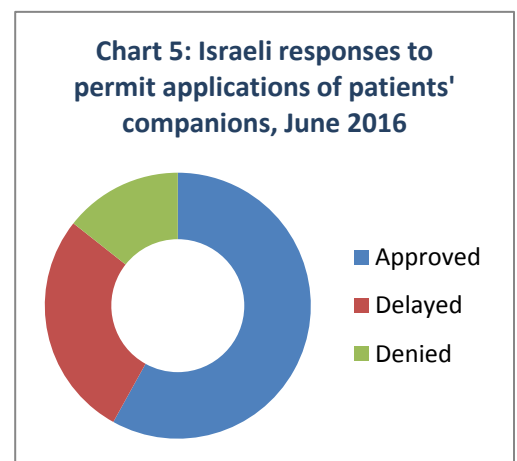
**Financial coverage:** 93.44% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in June were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.9% were self-funded, and 1.57% were funded by Nour Al-Alam Foundation, 0.95% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.81% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.14% by UNRWA, 0.1% by the Military Medical Services, 0.05% by Hadassah fund and 0.05% by other organizations.

**Denied care:** 209 patients (146 males; 63 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 6 children and 10 patients over 60 years old. June represented the second highest number of patients denied in one month since October 2015 when 255 patients were denied. Of the denied patients, 184 patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 23 in Israel and 2 in Jordan. 203 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 3 by physician for human rights-Israel, 2 were self-funded, 1 by other organization. Of those denied: 4 (1.91%) submitted their applications less than 7 days before the appointment but 28.23% (59) had waited for a response 8-14 days; 69.38% (145) waited 15-30 days; and 1 (0.48%) patient waited more than 30 days. The denied patients had appointments for: orthopedics (51); neurosurgery (30); oncology (18); ophthalmology (15); cardiology (12); general surgery and nuclear medicine (11) each; urology and ENT (9) each; hematology (7); internal medicine and nephrology (6) each; neurology and endocrinology (4) each; vascular surgery and dermatology (3) each; plastic surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, and laboratory analysis (2) each; heart catheterization, chest disease, chest surgery, and rehabilitation (1) each.

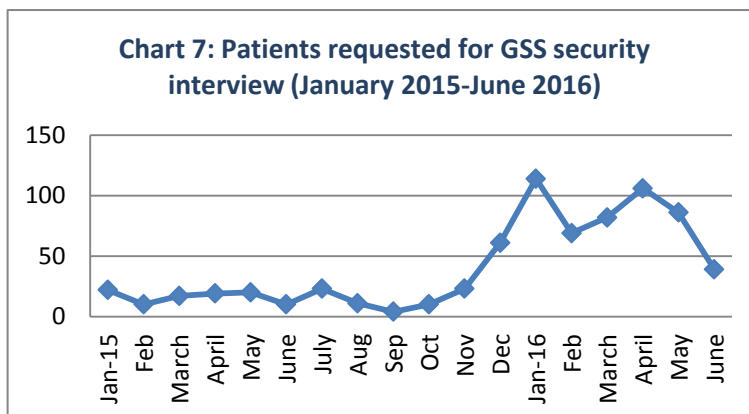
**Delayed care:** 437 patients (258 males; 179 females) were delayed in reaching health care in June, among them 135 children and 45 patients over the age of 60; they received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 437 patients delayed, 344 (78.72%) had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals and 93 (21.28%) in Israel. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in: oncology (88); ophthalmology (58); cardiology (42); orthopedics (35); pediatrics (34); hematology (30); neurosurgery (22); nuclear medicine (20); internal medicine (16); urology (14); general surgery (12); nephrology, heart surgery and vascular surgery (9) each; obstetrics/gynecology (8); ENT (6); neurology, maxilla-facial surgery and plastic surgery (4) each; chest disease (3); ICU, rehabilitation and laboratory analysis (2) each; pediatric surgery, infertility, endocrinology and heart catheterization (1) each. Out of 518 delayed patient applicants, 13.96% had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date. However, 32.72% waited 8-14 days, 51.03% waited 15-30 days and 1.6% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 3 applications were not accounted for. Out of the 437 delayed patient applications, the status of 344 (78.72%) was pending but 36 (8.24%) were asked to change their companions, 34 (7.78%) were waiting for results of security interviews, 1 was denied after a security interview, 5 were waiting for security interview, 1 was asked to make a new appointment, 6 were asked to reapply, and 10 were returned because they were not suitable according to the Israeli authorities. 42 patients out of the delayed were eventually approved late, within the first 2 weeks of July 2016.

Applications of companions of the delayed patients in June were a total of 633, out of them 520 were pending, 21 were pending after a security interview, 72 were not accepted as patient companion, 12 applications were not suitable, 4 waited for a security interview and 4 were asked to reapply.

**Patients' companions:** In June, 2,296 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 58.06% were approved, 11.4% lower than the average for 2015; 14.34% were denied and 27.6% were delayed and pending (**Chart 5**). Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany patients and permits are conditional on security clearance for those aged 55 or younger. In June, a policy change waived female companions aged 45-55 from additional security clearance procedures, which may have contributed to a slight increase in the approval rate for companions and a decline in denials and delays in June (**Chart 6**). Otherwise, a clear steady decline can be noted in the approval rates for patients' companions from January 2012 to May 2016.



**Security Interviews:** 39 patients (27 males; 12 females), 35 aged between 18-60, 1 under age of 18, and 3 over 60, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). The 39 patients requested for interviews were seeking medical care for: oncology (8), ophthalmology (6), nuclear medicine (5), internal medicine (3), neurosurgery (3), cardiology (3), general surgery (2), hematology (2), heart surgery (2), and vascular surgery, urology, pediatrics, orthopedics and laboratory analysis (1 each). The number of patients requested for a security interview as a condition to process their permit applications has increased dramatically since November 2015 (**Chart 7**).



Of the 39 patients requested for for GSS, only 2 were approved, 33 were pending, 1 was instructed to change companion, 1 was instructed to re-apply for a permit and 2 were denied.

**Patients and companions cross Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,522 Gaza patients (and 1,401 companions) crossed Erez in June to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 65 patients were transferred by ambulance (using two ambulances and back-to-back procedures), with 60 companions. Erez crossing was open for 25 days during regular daytime working hours and closed for 5 days (4 Saturdays and 1 Jewish holiday) in June.

#### Infant's father detained 15 days on return to Gaza

Tareq Kamal Al-Haj, a 41-year-old man from Gaza, father of 7 children, was arrested on June 22, 2016, at Erez checkpoint while returning to Gaza with his 2.5 year old son, Yousef, from Tel-Hashomir hospital, according to Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza. Several hours after Tareq's arrest, family members brought the child from Erez to home in Gaza. The child had been taken to Tel-Hashomir to donate bone marrow for his younger brother Yassin, 8 months old, who has been a patient at Tel-Hashomir since April 5, 2016, for treatment of a familial immunity disease. The infant is still in the hospital, accompanied by his mother, and will remain for 3 months following the transplantation. The father, Tareq, was detained for 15 days and released. In a telephone interview with WHO, he said that he had been taken to court 3 times before being released without charge.

**Humanitarian health workers face limited access through at Erez:** Of 29 permit applications for health personnel submitted by WHO for entrance or exit to the Gaza Strip, only 19 (65.5%) applications were approved. 6 out of 17 (35.3%) for WHO staff and 4 out of 8 (50%) for health cluster partners' applications were denied.

**Table 4: Humanitarian health staff access permits in/out of Gaza, June 2016**

	Total	Approved	Denied	Pending
Out of Gaza: WHO staff	16	10	6	0
Out of Gaza: MoH, Health Cluster partners	8	4	4	0
Into Gaza: WHO staff (Jerusalem ID-holders)	1	1	0	0
Into Gaza: International medical delegates	4	4	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19 (65.5%)</b>	<b>10 (34.5%)</b>	<b>0 (0%)</b>