



## Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD1 (Feb. 17, 2015)

### Summary: January 2015

#### Access restrictions tighten

- **Rafah border:** The Rafah border with Egypt was opened on only 3 days in January, allowing only 33 patients to travel to Egypt for medical treatment.
- **Access through Erez:** Only 8 in 10 patients who applied for Israeli permits to travel through Erez checkpoint to access medical treatment were approved. 52 patients (5 females and 47 males, including 4 children and 3 elderly) were denied permits, of the 1,489 patients who applied and 235 patients (92 females and 143 males, including 70 children and 12 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications, and missed their medical treatment appointments.
- **Interrogations:** 22 patients (including 7 females, and 2 males over 60 years old) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. 1 patient was later approved.
- 5 war-related casualty patients, all males aged 25–40 years, applied for permits to exit Gaza via Erez checkpoint during January, of which 4 were approved and 1 was denied access. The patients had been referred by the Ministry of Health to Makassed hospital.

#### New referral guidelines, fewer MoH referrals

- **New referral guidelines reduce numbers:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 1,307 patients were issued referrals in January to non-MoH health facilities for specialized treatment, a drop of 15.6% from the monthly average in 2014, following new guidelines.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in referrals remained wide: 58.22% male patients versus 41.78% female patients. 24.1% of all referrals were for children aged 0–17 years and 20.35% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for January:** NIS 7,395,906.

## REFERRALS

### Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,307 referrals in January, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza, 182 fewer (12.23%) than the previous month and a continuation of a trend since June 2014. The decrease in Gaza referrals is a result of new MoH policy guidelines to reduce the cost of referrals for specialized treatments, especially to Israeli hospitals. The closure of Rafah border has also reduced Gaza referrals to Egypt.

Approval of financial coverage for Gaza patients can only be issued by the Ministry of Health central RAD in Ramallah. Appointments in Israeli hospitals cannot be made for a patient without first attempting to obtain an appointment in a Palestinian hospital for the specific patient and receiving a refusal, a process that must be documented.

The stricter guidelines caused delays in patients receiving approvals for financial coverage of referral treatment and in making hospital appointments in January. RAD data for January showed that 34.12% of applications for referral waited more than 31 days to be processed. Only 65.88% of referral applications were processed by the RAD within 31 days compared to 90.2% in 2014.

Fewer hospitals are available to patients, and the receiving hospitals do not have bed vacancies, so appointment management is currently very difficult. "Patients must wait for appointments, sometimes more than three months," a Gaza RAD employee said. Delays can increase the suffering of patients and families and can lead to deterioration of health, especially for those with life-threatening conditions.

In January, referrals to Israeli medical facilities dropped by 40.56% from the monthly average of 2014. (Table 1, Chart 1). The lack of capacity (personnel, equipment and medicines) for specialized treatments within the Ministry of Health and the private sector within Gaza is the main driver for referrals.

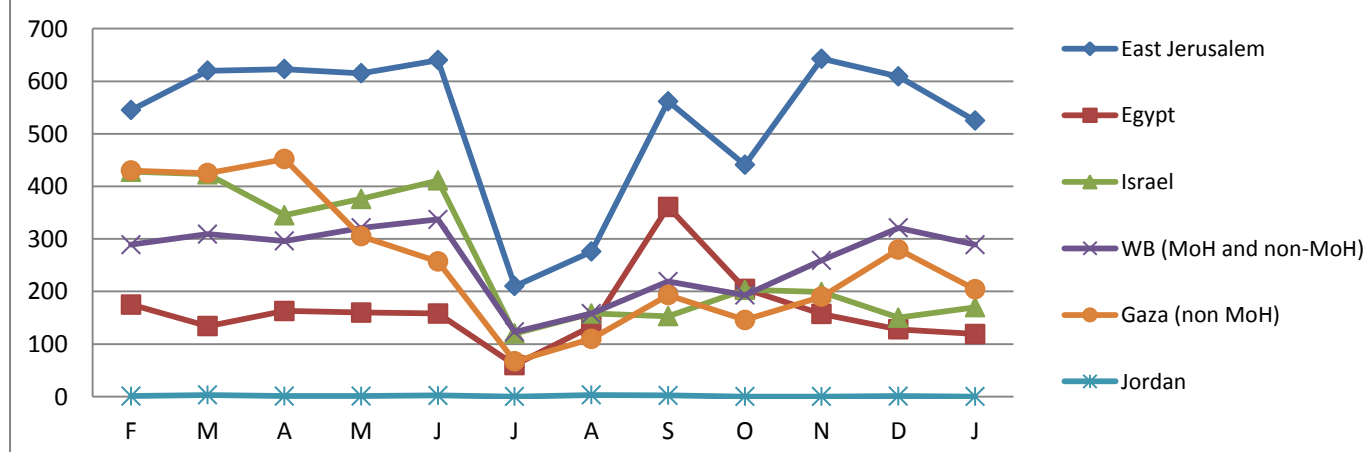
Referral costs represent one-third of the MoH budget. Budget shortfalls caused by a post-2012 drop in donor aid and Israeli failure to transfer tax reimbursements to the Palestinian Authority (PA) have resulted in high debts to referral hospitals and pharmaceutical suppliers. Jordanian hospitals no longer accept MoH referral patients due to outstanding PA debt. Israeli hospitals, however, are paid fully by the Israeli government from the PA monthly withholdings.

Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January 2015 compared to 2014 monthly average

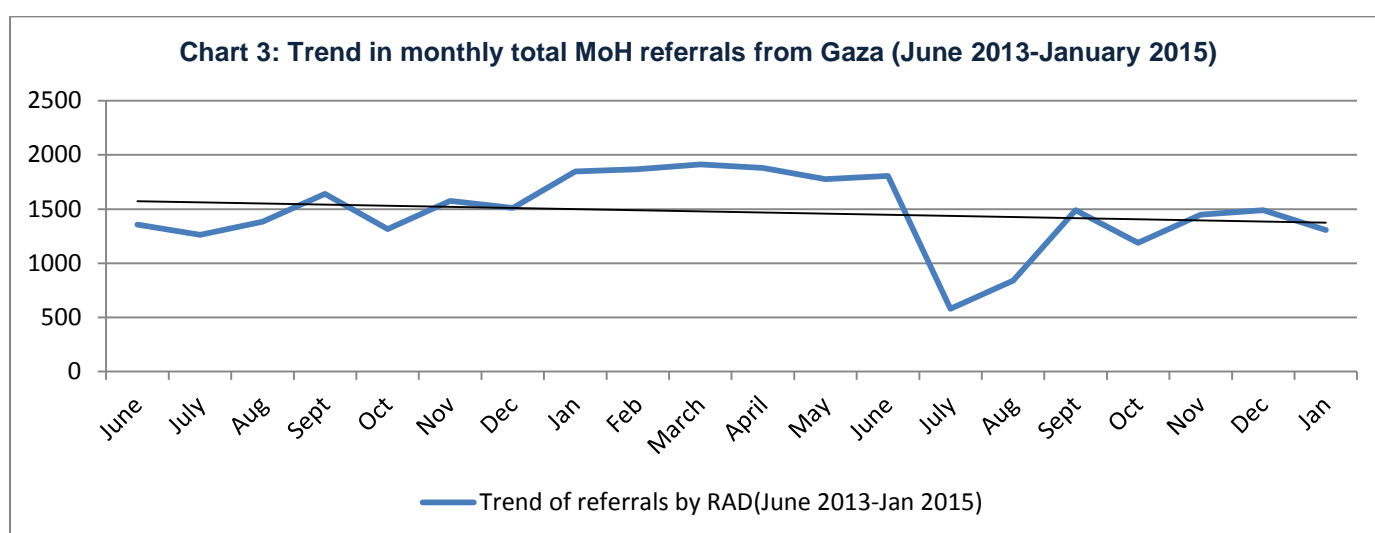
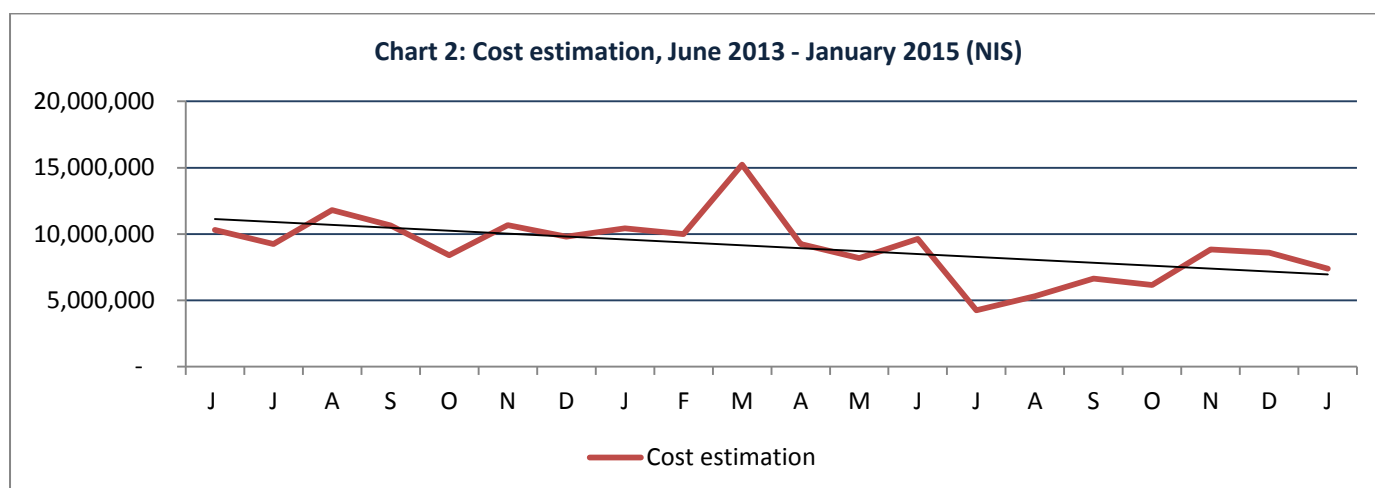
Referral Destination	2014 (monthly average)	January 2015	% of change
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	267	204	-23.60%
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	259	289	11.58%
East Jerusalem	529	525	-0.76%
Jordan	1	0	
Israel	286	170	-40.56%
Egypt	169	119	-29.59%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,511</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>-13.50%</b>

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Chart 1: Trend of referrals for Gaza patients, February 2014 to January 2015



**Chart 2 and Chart 3** show respectively the trend of cost estimation and the trend of number of referrals in the last 20 months.



**Note:** The central RAD office in Ramallah records indicate 174 more referrals for Gaza referrals than registered by the Gaza RAD. The discrepancy may be due to the fact that separate referrals are registered when patients require additional procedures or separate hospital admissions. The estimated cost for January referrals based on the central RAD data in Ramallah was NIS 7,395,906.

Of the 1,307 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in January, 1,103 (84.39%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 984 patients (75.28%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 119 required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

In January, the 204 referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were mainly for MRI (68), heart catheterization (60), urology (17), rehabilitation (11) and the remaining (48) were for 12 other specialties.

24.1% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 20.35% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 41.78% of the total, compared to 58.22% male patients. 93.8% of referrals in January were for hospital admissions and 6.2% for outpatient clinics.

**Medical reasons for referrals:** The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—230 referrals (17.6%), ophthalmology—127 (9.72%), nuclear medicine—97 (7.42%), orthopaedic surgery —91 (9.96%), MRI —80 (6.12%), paediatrics—78 (5.97%), heart catheterization—76 (5.81%), neurosurgery—62 (4.74%), urology—59 (4.51%), haematology—51 (3.9%), and the remaining 356 (27.24%) referrals were to 20 other specialties.

**Referrals of casualty patients:** the Ministry referred 5 casualty patients with complicated injuries to Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem. Of the 5 patients, 4 were approved permits to cross Erez in January, and 1 was denied.

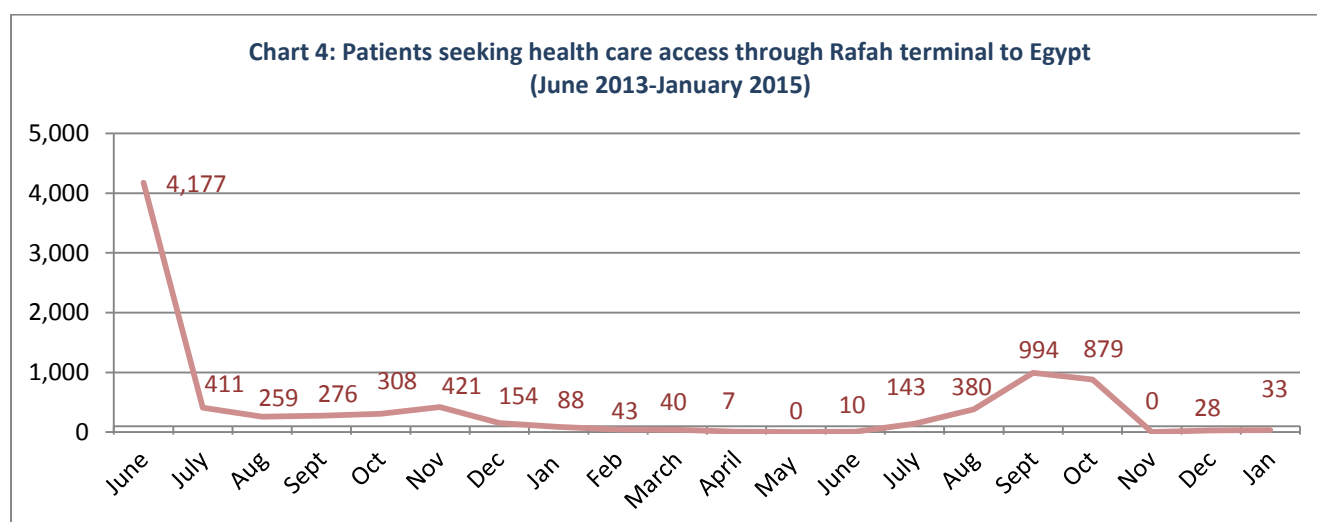
## Access through Rafah terminal

**Patient access to Egypt remains restricted:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was opened by the Egyptian authorities in both directions on 3 days allowing 1,516 travellers to exit Rafah terminal towards Egypt during the month of January. Out these, 33 were patients seeking medical treatment accompanied by 33 companions; all were transferred by ambulances. 114 travellers were denied access and returned by the Egyptian authorities (**Table 2**).

Table 2: Travellers exiting Rafah to Egypt	1516
Patients	33
Patient companions	33
Number of travellers denied	114 (7.5%)
Days closed	28
Days opened	3

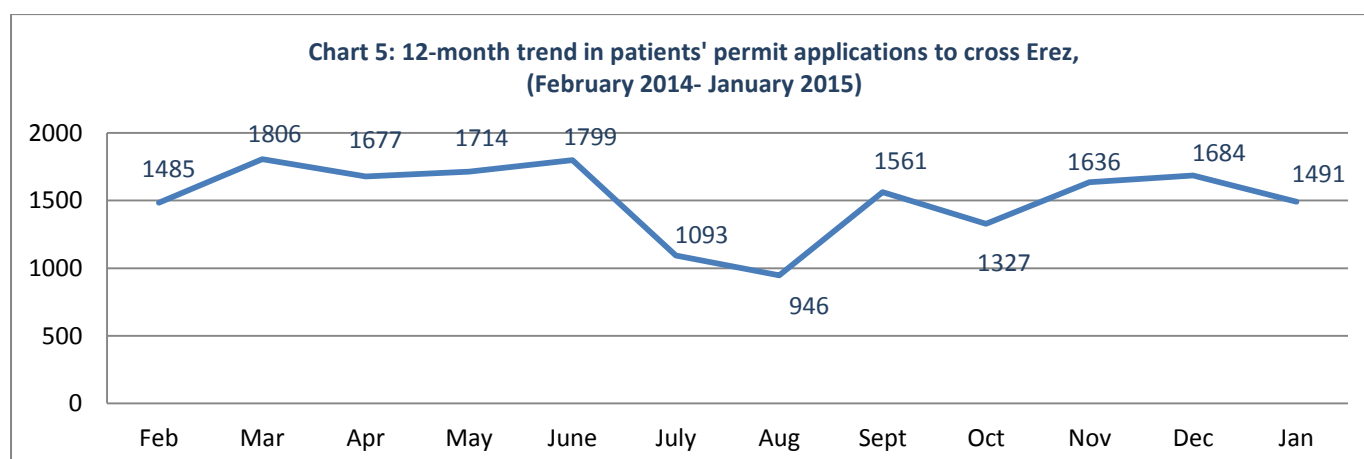
Also 1,220 travellers who were stranded in Egypt were allowed to return to Gaza. The Palestinian side of the terminal registered 16 returning patients. Six of those returning to Gaza were children injured during the military attack in summer who returned after long treatment abroad. According to Palestinian authorities at Rafah terminal, 3 donated ambulances and 3 truckloads of medical disposables entered through the terminal during January. No medical delegations crossed into Gaza from Egypt during January.

Health access to Egypt is an important alternative for Gaza patients, especially those with advanced cancer, renal and heart diseases, and orthopedic and ophthalmological conditions, but has been restricted since July 2013. In 2014 the terminal was closed on 241 days (66% of days) and had been shut totally since the October 25 attack in north Sinai which killed 30 Egyptian soldiers. During and immediately after the July-August military attack on Gaza, however, access was facilitated for casualty patients and others (**Chart 4**).



## Access through Erez

In January, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez (casualty patients as well as normal referral patients) was 1,489, 10.84% less than the pre-conflict monthly average of 1,670 applications (**Chart 5**). Out of the 1,489 permit applications, 744 (49.97%) were for patients destined to East Jerusalem, 350 (23.51%) to Israel, 349 (23.44%) to West Bank and 45 (2.96%) to Jordan and 1 (0.07%) to Turkey.



In January, 1,202 (80.73%) of patients' permit applications were approved (**Table 3**). 52 applicants (3.49%) were denied access. 235 (15.78%) did not receive an answer in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care. The volume of permit applications in January 2015 was 3.19% lower and the approval rate was 7.05% lower than in 2014. A total of 52 patients were denied access in January 2015 compared to only 37 patients denied in January 2014 (**Table 4**). The average rate of approvals for permit applications in 2014 was 81.69%. **Chart 6 shows a declining 12-month trend in Israeli approvals of patients' permit applications.**

**Table 3: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS risk, January 2014**

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	70	85	59	74	0	2	11	9	0	0
4 - 17	112	149	85	124	0	2	27	23	0	0
18- 40	212	228	160	131	4	31	48	66	7	8
41 - 60	200	219	193	177	1	9	6	33	0	5
Over 60	103	111	103	96	0	3	0	12	0	2
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>697</b>	<b>792</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>602</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,489</b>		<b>1,202 (80.73%)</b>		<b>52 (3.49%)</b>		<b>235 (15.78%)</b>		<b>22 (1.48%)</b>	

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

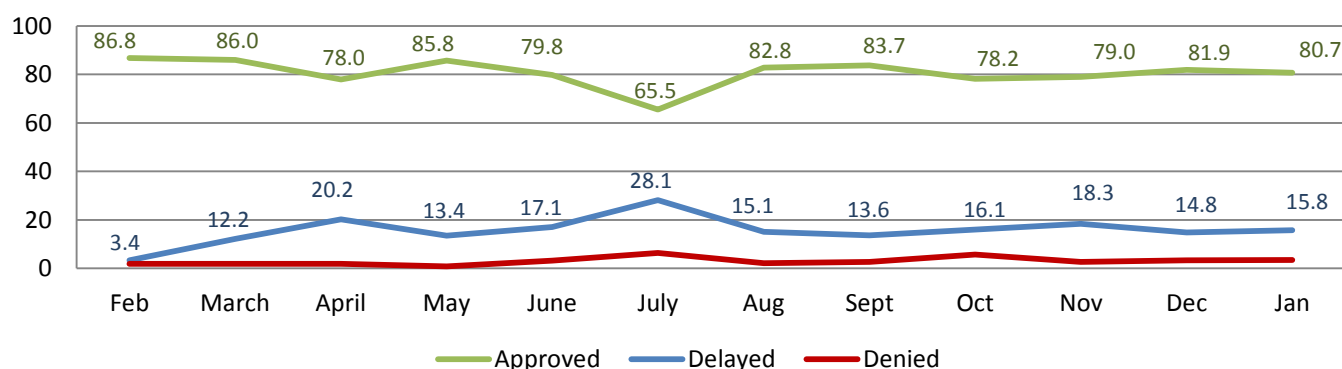
**Table 4: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez by response, sex of applicant (number and %) in 2014 compared to corresponding periods in 2014**

Period	January 2014		January 2015		Monthly Average 2014		January – December 2014	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1538</b> (F:701; M:837)		<b>1,489</b> (F:697; M:792)		<b>1,522</b> ( F:692; M:830)		<b>18,266</b> (F:8,301;M:9,965)	
Approved	1350 (F:645; M:705)	87.78%	1,202 (F:600; M:602)	80.73%	1,243 (F:594; M:650)	81.69%	14,921 (F:7,124;M:7,797)	81.69%
Denied	37 (F:10; M:27)	2.4%	52 (F: 5; M:47)	3.49%	44 (F:15; M:29)	0.26%	528 (F:176;M:352)	2.89%
Delayed	151 (F:46; M:105)	9.82%	235 (F:92; M:143)	15.78%	235 (F:83 M:151)	15.42%	2,817 (F:1,001;M:1,816)	15.42%
-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)	<b>33</b> (F:4;M:29)	2.15%	<b>22</b> (F:7; M:15)	1.48%	<b>15</b> (F:2; M:13)	1%	<b>179</b> (F:21;M:158)	0.98%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Financial coverage:** 91.2% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in January were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 4.03% were self-funded, 2.15% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 0.94% by the Peres Center for Peace, 0.87% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.34% funded by receiving hospitals (5 casualties), 0.20% by other organizations, and 0.07% each by MSF, private insurance, Hadassah fund and Turkey.

**Chart 6: Israeli responses to permit applications, 12-month trend, February 2014 - January 2015 (%)**



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

**Denied care:** 52 patients (5 females; 47 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 4 children and 3 persons over 60 years. 45 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 2 in Israel and 5 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 45 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 5 self-funded, 1 by Noor Al-Alam Foundation, and 1 by Turkey. 27 patients waited 1-7 days, 13 waited 8-14 days, 6 waited 15-30 days and 6 waited over 30 days before receiving denials. Of those denied, 12 patients had appointments for orthopedics, 10 for ophthalmology, 7 for nuclear medicine, 5 for general surgery, 4 for ENT, 3 for neurosurgery, 3 for oncology, 2 for nuclear medicine, 1 for plastic surgery, 1 for nephrology, 1 for cardiology, and 1 for dermatology.

**The District Liaison office of the MoH reported that access for patients who don't have Israeli issued ID cards recently became very difficult. This category includes people who entered Gaza legally with Israeli permits but their permit expired.**

**Delayed care:** 235 patient applicants (143 males; 92 females), including 70 children and 12 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 235 patients delayed, 73.62% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 22.98% in Israel, and 3.4% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in orthopedics (32), ophthalmology (29), neurosurgery (25), cardiology (24), nuclear medicine (21), pediatrics (17), oncology (16), hematology (12), neurology (10), general surgery (10), and the rest were 39 for 13 different specialties.

**Security Interviews:** 22 patients (15 males; 7 female), 2 of them are elderly over 60, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. Only 1 was approved after the interview.

**Patients and companions crossed Erez:** The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 865 patients (and 786 companions) crossed Erez in January to access hospitals outside of Gaza, which was 28% less than the number of patients for whom permits were approved. Following a move by the Gaza Ministry of Interior to locate a new office for its employees at the Palestinian side of the terminal, access through Erez terminal was suspended January 8-14 except for urgent cases, as a response by both Palestinian Authority and Israeli officials. The terminal returned to normal working hours after the office was removed. Of the 865 patients, the District Liaison office of the MoH reported coordination of 68 patient transfers by ambulance (back-to-back).