

NTPF Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Non-Covid Healthcare and the Impact on Waiting Lists

16 July 2020

Introduction

The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) thanks the Committee for the invitation to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Non-Covid Healthcare and waiting lists.

The NTPF's functions in respect of hospital waiting lists and arranging hospital treatment are set out in its legislation:

1. to make arrangements ... for the provision of hospital treatment; and
2. to collect, collate and validate information in relation to persons waiting for hospital treatment and to put in place information systems and procedures for that purpose;

Further to the second of these functions, the NTPF has established information systems and procedures to provide validated information on hospital waiting lists, publishing reports monthly.

With regard to the first function set out above, the NTPF working with the HSE, the Department of Health and the Hospital System made considerable progress in recent years in reducing wait times for patients requiring surgery and procedures and, having had its funding for outpatients increased last year, was beginning to make progress with respect to the outpatient waiting list.

The Covid-19 pandemic unfortunately has had and continues to have a very significant impact on wait times for patients. The NTPF, working closely with its colleagues, is once again working across the public and private hospital systems to treat patients faster in the current environment.

Background

The NTPF recommenced arranging hospital treatment in 2017. Prior to that, the waiting list for surgery and procedures was growing at a rate of 1,000 per month. Following the commencement of the NTPF's commissioning work this trend was reversed and by February 2020, the waiting list for surgery and procedures had been reduced by almost 20,000 to 66,705.

The NTPF contributed to this reduction by arranging surgery and procedures for 60,000 patients. As well as adopting the historic NTPF approach of arranging care for public

patients in private hospitals, the NTPF now also works with public hospitals to open up further public capacity, including delivering care in evenings and on weekends. In this way, more than one third of treatments arranged by the NTPF are arranged with public hospitals.

On commencing work on the outpatient waiting list the NTPF arranged more than 30,000 appointments in 2019, contributing to reductions in the number of patients on the list in each of the last four months of the year. Notwithstanding increases in patients on the waiting list in the first two months of 2020, the number of people waiting for an outpatient appointment at the end of February 2020 was lower than it had been 8 months previously.

It is worth noting that in arranging outpatient appointments, the NTPF mainly leveraged capacity in public hospitals. For example, having worked with the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital to address cataract surgery waiting lists, the NTPF was able to assist in providing outpatient consultations for patients on the hospital's ophthalmology waiting lists. Patients who were found to require cataract surgery could have a preoperative assessment on the same day as their first consultation and have their surgery within weeks. This compares to the previous situation where a patient found to require cataract surgery could wait over 18 months after their initial outpatient consultation before being assessed for surgery. In other hospitals the NTPF is able to assist in arranging minor procedures for patients on the same day as the outpatient consultation, in a "see and treat" model.

Covid 19

The Covid-19 pandemic had an immediate and significant impact on the work of the NTPF and on waiting lists. In the first three months of 2020, the NTPF arranged surgery, procedures and scopes for more than 9,000 patients and arranged outpatient consultations for 8,500 patients. At the end of March, however, due to the pandemic, non-time critical elective care was postponed. While this treatment began to recommence in May, it is in a much changed environment with inevitable limitations, and throughput to date has been lower than before the onset of the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic has seen the number waiting for an appointment for surgery and procedures increasing by 17,518 (26%), the number waiting for outpatient consultations increasing by 25,845 (5%) and the number waiting for Gastro-Intestinal Scopes growing by 13,173 (58%).

During the period from late March to June, the NTPF's capacity to arrange treatment for patients on the waiting list was limited. Over this period the NTPF used its skills and resources to assist the national response to the pandemic in every way that it could. With regard to hospital care this included:

- Membership of the NPHEP Subgroup on Acute Hospital Preparedness,

- Advising on the acute hospital action plan,
- Assisting in the assessment of ICU capacity across public and private systems,
- Developing ICT systems to support the management and oversight of the treatment of public patients in private hospitals,
- Collecting data relating to activity in private hospitals,
- Supporting the NPHET Subgroup on Health Sector Workforce.
- Making staff available to assist with other essential requirements.

The NTPF has now recommenced arranging treatment for patients in both private and public hospitals. So far we have arranged treatment for 2,000 patients in June and July. In addition, like our colleagues across the health system we are looking at new ways that we can support services for patients in the changed environment, including virtual consultations, diagnostic services and clinical validation.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges for the Irish hospital system, including with regard to the provision of non-Covid care. There continues to be enormous uncertainty as to how this pandemic will play out. Having noted that however, the NTPF is structured so as to avail of any and all capacity in both the public and private healthcare systems. In doing so the NTPF will be able to call upon the expertise and dedication of its staff and the flexibility and agility of its highly developed systems and processes.