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Australia's private hospitals essential to manage elective surgery surge

Australia's private hospitals will be essential to addressing the backlog of necessary elective surgery when restrictions ease, new data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reveals.

The new data shows the median wait time for elective surgery has increased by a week, from 41 days pre COVID (2018-19) to 48 days in 2020-21. This is largely because restrictions on elective surgery meant many cases were deferred.

Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) CEO Michael Roff said this is a very big increase in waiting times.

"When you look at surgeries by category, the increases in median wait time are even more significant. Those waiting for head and neck surgery now wait 112 days, up from 84 pre-COVID, while ophthalmology patients wait 118 days rather than 73, an increase of six and a half weeks," he said.

While the rise in public hospital elective admissions from a COVID-induced low in 2019-20 is good news, additional widespread restrictions after the period covered by the report means waiting times for surgery will now be even longer.

"This data illustrates the essential role private hospitals will need to play in helping Australians get the vital surgery they need. Just as private hospitals have helped the public system with the pandemic response, they will be essential to clearing the surgical backlog post-pandemic.

"Without private hospitals picking up the slack, Australians will be waiting a great deal longer to have their surgery – often important for quality of life, like cataract surgery to correct impaired vision or joint replacements to remove pain and improve mobility."

Mr Roff said restrictions on necessary elective surgery should not last one day longer than they need to.

"With signs the Omicron wave is plateauing in several states, health departments need to consult with private hospitals about easing restrictions in a safe way, so hospitals are ready to increase surgical capacity to provide much-needed treatment to those Australians who have had surgery deferred.

"When restrictions ease, public hospitals should not be taking in a single privately insured patient until all of their public patients have been treated. It is time to stop them treating public patients as second-class citizens.

"It would be morally reprehensible if public hospitals were to bring in a large number of privately insured patients to take advantage of the even longer wait times Australians have had to deal with, while those who need the public system languish on ever lengthening waiting lists," he said.

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Australian
Private Hospitals
Association



The Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) is the peak industry body representing the private hospital and day surgery sector. The private hospital sector treats 4.5 million patients a year.