

MEDIA RELEASE

Thursday, 31 October 2024

Longest wait on record for mental health patients in EDs

A lack of capacity in Australia's health system is failing patients suffering from poor mental health, with more patients needing acute care and waiting times for patients in emergency departments (ED) now the longest on record.

The Australian Medical Association's *Public hospital report card: mental health edition* shows more patients with mental health-related conditions are arriving at emergency departments by ambulance or police services, and more are arriving in a critical condition needing urgent care.

AMA President Dr Danielle McMullen said the latest figures showed the length of time spent in ED for patients presenting with mental health-related conditions was the highest on record in 2022–23.

On average, these patients spent seven hours in ED before being admitted to hospital, with 10 per cent of patients with mental health-related conditions spending more than 23 hours, or almost a day, in ED before receiving a hospital bed.

"Our public hospitals are under more strain than ever, and this is a direct result of the public hospital logjam," Dr McMullen said. "Australia has just 27 specialised mental health beds per 100,000 Australians — the lowest per-person capacity figure on record.

"The long waits for patients causes them, and their families, distress and places enormous pressures on hospital staff. Emergency departments are no place for someone suffering a critical mental health illness. They aren't designed in a way that's conducive to good mental healthcare."

The report also shows the number of Australians presenting to ED with a mental illness triaged as emergency has more than doubled from 9 to 21 per 10,000 people since 2010–11, while the number of urgent presentations has grown from 37 to 57 per 10,000 people.

"Australia is failing to provide appropriate care to patients in the community, leaving many with no alternative to seeking essential care at their public hospital — this needs to change," Dr McMullen said.

"This situation is extremely distressing for the dedicated staff working in EDs, who are not supported or sufficiently resourced to manage patients with complex mental health issues who can become agitated when facing long waits for care. Tragically, these overcrowded and stressful situations can contribute to unsafe psychosocial work environments and staff burnout, and in the worst cases, assaults on staff.

"The figures in this report card show a health system that is failing to provide care for some of the most vulnerable in our community.

"The solution to the growing mental health burden on our hospitals is additional resourcing and real reform to the delivery and availability of mental health support at all levels. Without this, we will continue to see the

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figures in this report card get worse and medical and health staff leaving the profession due to burnout and stress. We need all levels of government to work cooperatively to address the current situation and ensure people have access to care.”

[Read the AMA's *Public hospital report card: mental health edition 2024*.](#)

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