

Capital Region Physician Access Survey

Survey of Wait Times to Access Physician Services Conducted for the Capital Region Medical Staff Association September 2000

The Survey of Wait Times to access physician services in the Capital Region was carried out during July and August, 2000. The survey has been carried out annually during July and August since 1997. Physicians have been asked the same questions each year regarding wait times. In 1999 several new questions were added for family physicians asking if they deliver babies, work in continuing care institutions and make home visits. This year family physicians were asked if they are actively recruiting to their practice and a question was asked about difficulty in making appropriate referrals.

1312 physicians in the Capital Health Region were surveyed by fax, with a reminder sent to all who had not responded after 3 weeks, and a second reminder after 6 weeks. 640 family physicians received surveys, of whom 312 responded. 237 Specialists including Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pediatrics and Psychiatry responded from 499 medical specialists and subspecialists surveyed. Lastly, 90 surveys were received from 163 Surgical Specialists/Subspecialists.. An additional 47 physicians who returned questionnaires were not included in the data, either because they surveys were returned too late to be included or the physicians indicated the survey was not applicable.

	Total Number (2000)	Responses (2000)	Response Rate (2000)	Response Rate (1999)	Response Rate (1998)*	Response Rate (1997)*
Family Physicians	640	312	48.8%	38.7%	19.8%	9.4%
Medical Specialists	499	237	47.5%	47.3%	26.2%	15.4%
Surgical Specialists	163	92	56.4%	57.0%	32.4%	30.5%

Primary Care Access:

31% of family physicians are no longer accepting new patients and a further 38% accept new patients with restrictions. Of those who selectively accept new patients, more than one third accept only the family members of existing patients. The number of family physicians accepting new patients has declined from 73% in 1999, and is the lowest level since the survey began.

The average wait time for a routine booking has also increased during each year of the survey. Compared to 1999, fewer family physicians indicated that they deliver babies, working in a continuing care institution or make home visits.

Two new questions were added this year. Physicians were asked if they are actively recruiting physicians to their practices. 43% answered yes. 93% of family physicians indicated that they are "experiencing difficulty in finding specialists who will accept referrals.

Are you accepting new patients?"
 (From Family Physicians Survey)

307 out of 640 physicians responded; response rate: 48.0%

69% of doctors indicated that they were accepting new patients, a decrease from 1999 when 73% accepted new patients, and the lowest level since the survey began.

Figure 1: Physicians Accepting New Patients

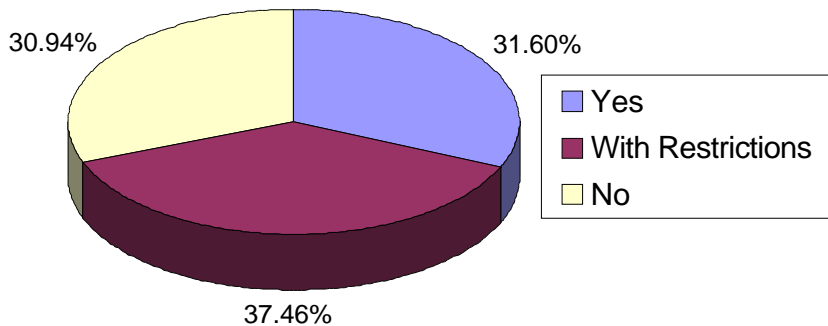
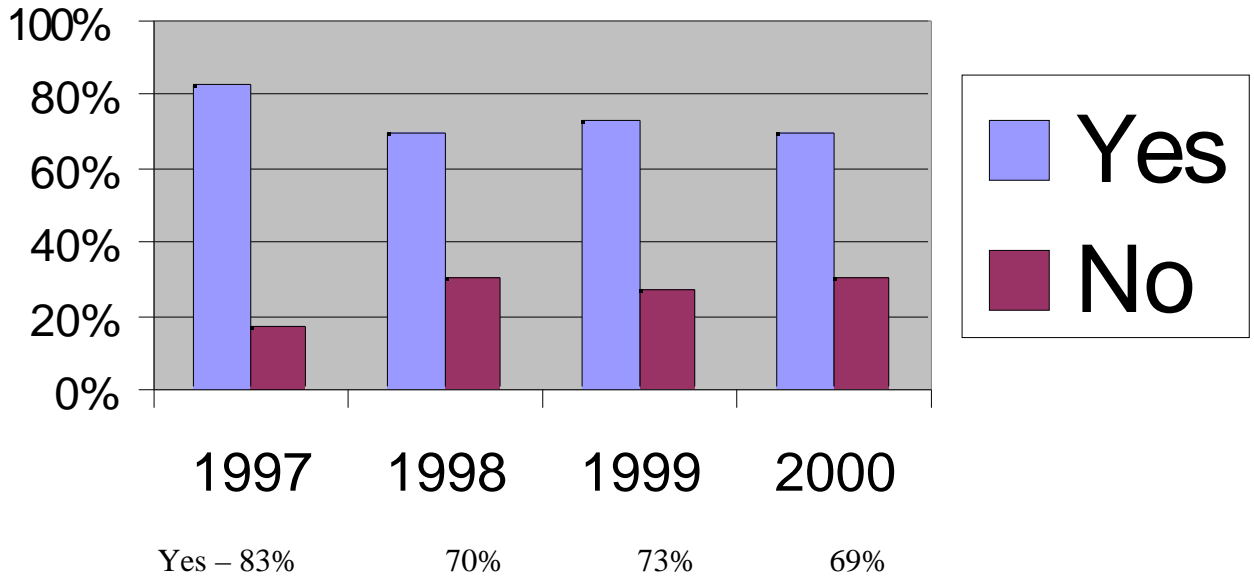


Figure 2: Physicians Accepting New Patients

“Please provide a brief explanation of restrictions to your practice?”
(from Family Physician Survey)

109 explained the restrictions to their practice out of 115 doctors who indicated restrictions.

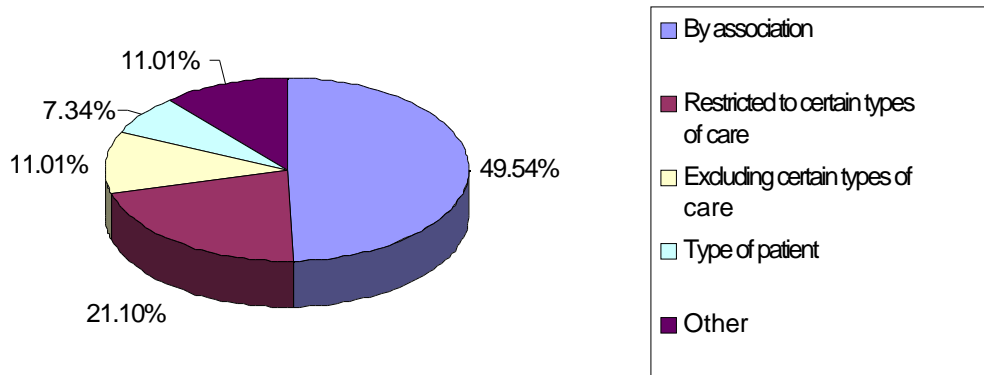


Figure 3: Physicians’ Restrictions to Practice

By association (50%)

The most common restriction in this category was “family members of existing patients”, with 35.8% of physicians with restrictions; “referrals from other physicians” - 9.6%; “friends of patients” – 4.1%.

Restricted to certain types of care (21%)

These physicians only accepted patients for only certain types of care, including: breast problems, Obstetric and Gynecology, Psychiatry, maternity, and HIV patients.

Excluding certain types of care (11%)

These physicians indicated that they had restricted their practice to avoid patients with time-consuming medical conditions including: chronic/severe pain, back pain, fibromyalgia and WCB claims. Physicians also indicated that they do no longer did Obstetrics or Pediatrics.

Type of Patient (7%)

These physicians restricted their practice to certain segments of society including: students, people who live in the area and Francophones. (These included physicians working for student services, etc.)

Other (11%)

Responses included: medical-legal cases only; take on patients only after meeting the patient first; for consultation only; limit new patients to specific time periods.

“How soon can you book patients on a routine basis?”
 (from Family Physicians survey)

306 responses out of 604. 50.7% response rate.

Table 1: Family Physicians’ Routine Booking

	2000	1999	1998	1997	Change from 1999	Change from 1998	Change from 1997
Average	8.5 days	7 days	6 days	2 days	+1.5 days	+2.5 days	+6.5 days
Mean	2 days	2.5 days	N/A	N/A	- 0.5 day	N/A	N/A
Mode	2 days	“same day”	N/A	N/A	+2 days	N/A	N/A

Average of 8.48 days with a median of 2 days. The booking times ranged from immediately to 5 months; with eight outliers removed from the data, the average wait time is 6 days.

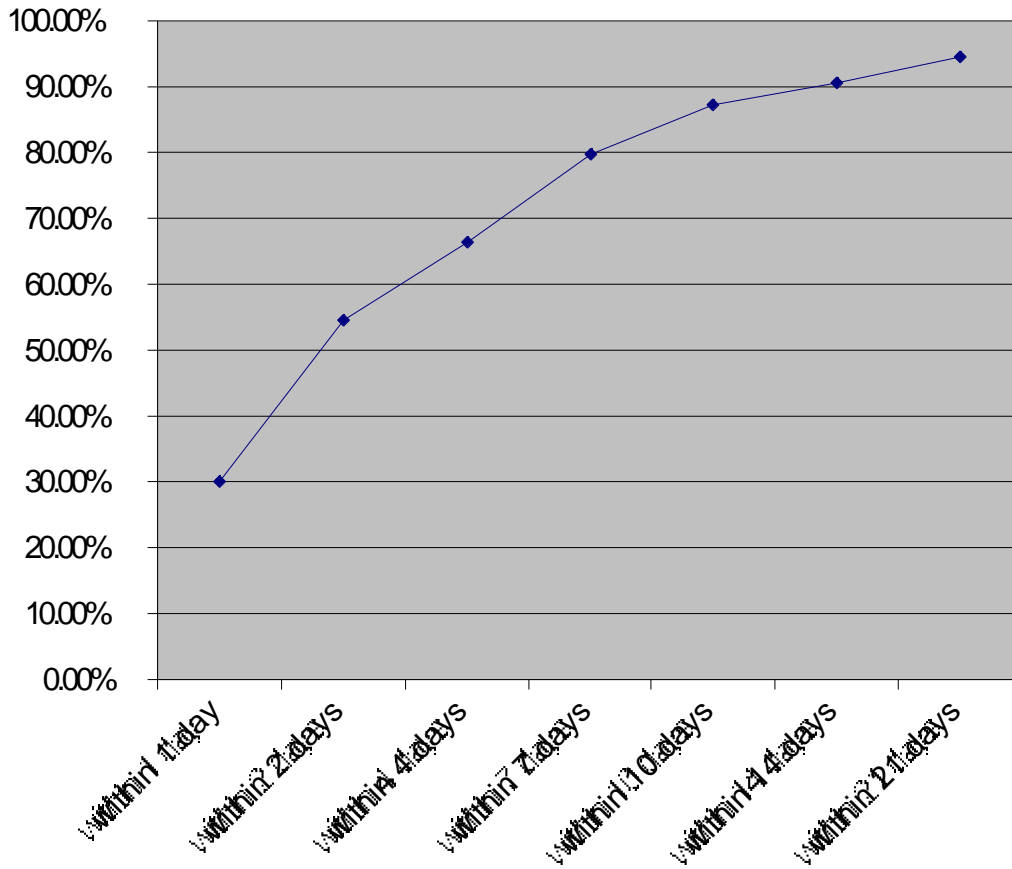


Figure 4: Booking Time for Routine Patients

Access to Surgical Services:

There were some improvements over 1999 in total wait time from initial appointment to surgery, notably in Neurosurgery, Urology and Vascular Surgery. Orthopedics improved marginally over 1999, but for non-urgent cases, the wait time was still twice that in 1998. Wait lists for Cardiac Surgery continued to increase.¹ Ophthalmology wait times for urgent cases improved slightly; however wait times increased for non-urgent cases. Total wait times increased for general surgery for both urgent and non-urgent patients. Wait times for non-urgent plastic surgery increased dramatically to one year. Otolaryngology continued to have wait times of close to one year for non-urgent procedures.

¹Total wait times for Cardiac Surgery are calculated as time to referral to cardiologist and from cardiologist to surgery.

Wait times for an referral to various subspecialties are recorded for the first time in this year's survey.

Access to Medical Specialists:

In general, wait times for medical specialists and psychiatry increased. Obstetrics and Gynecology showed an improvement and Pediatrics remained fairly constant. Wait times for Cardiology continued to increase. The difficulties referred to by Family Physicians in making referrals to Gastroenterologists and Psychiatrists were reflected in increased wait time.

A number of subspecialties are reported for the first time this year so comparisons are not available.

“How soon can you book patients to be seen by the following specialists?” (from Family Physicians Survey), and
“How soon can patients be seen in you office for non-urgent/urgent problems?” (from Medical/Surgical Specialists Surveys)

Non-Urgent Specialist Wait Times (in days)

	2000		1999		1998	
	Family Physician	Specialist	Family Physician	Specialist	Family Physician	Specialist
Cardiology	90	91	79	76		
Cardiovascular & Thoracic Surgery		33		43		
Dermatology		89		70		
Endocrinology & Metabolism		125		165		
Gastroenterology	126	135	100	92	101	91
General Internal Medicine	54	45	60	37	55	56
General Surgery	59	65	61	42	48	43
Infectious Diseases		37		41		
Medical Genetics		150				
Medical Oncology		33		24		
Nephrology		67		46		
Perinatal Medicine		24				
Neurology	85	77	74	68	76	91
Neurosurgery	159	70	137	251	116	91
Obstetrics & Gynecology		64		84		72
Occupational Med.		10				
Ophthalmology		98		79		54
Orthopedics	143	130	127	121	120	61
Otolaryngology	216	227	190	188	135	186
Pediatric Cardiology		14				
Pediatric General Surgery		33				
Pediatrics		27		25		22
Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation		38				
Plastic Surgery		160		145		93
Psychiatry	137	73	127	76	112	77
Pulmonary Med.		84				
Respiratory Med.		89				
Rheumatology		55		40		
Urology	87	65	97	77	125	118
Vascular Surgery		62		76		84

Urgent Specialist Wait Times (in days)

	2000		1999		1998	
	Family Physician	Specialist	Family Physician	Specialist	Family Physician	Specialist
Cardiology	14.1	8.4	17	20	1	
Cardiovascular Surgery		OP – 33		11		14
Dermatology		10.2				
Endocrinology & Metabolism		12.3		18		
Gastroenterology	19.4	12.4	18	18	11	10
General Internal Medicine	10.5	9.5	11	3	3	8
General Surgery	8.8	8.6	8	7	14	9
Infectious Diseases		6.3		2		
Medical Genetics		2				
Medical Oncology		5.5		4		
Nephrology		7.4		6		
Perinatal/Neonatal Medicine		2				
Neurology	13.8	10	15	19	1	
Neurosurgery	31.5	6.8	21	11	1	7
Obstetrics & Gynecology		6.4		20		39
Occupational Med.		1.7				
Ophthalmology		8		4		3
Orthopedics	18.42	19.5	24	28	1	14
Otolaryngology	47.4	8.6	38	13	7	21
Pediatric Cardiology		1				
Pediatric General Surgery		2.5				
Pediatrics		0.97		S.D.		3
Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation		6.3				
Plastic Surgery		3.7		8		11
Psychiatry	35.3	17	30	14	1	11
Pulmonary Med.		16.5				
Respiratory Med.		10.8		12		
Rheumatology		4.5		4		
Urology	14.8	5.25	17	6	3	14
Vascular Surgery		5.5		2		14

Access to Psychiatry:

Of 36 psychiatrists who responded, 11 indicated that their practices were temporarily closed to new patients. Two others indicated that their practices were limited to specialized services such as third party assessments. One respondent indicated a 2.5 year wait and temporary closure of the practice; this data was considered an “outlier” and removed from the survey results.

There is a marked difference between the wait times reported by family physicians and those reported by psychiatrists. As specialists were not asked if they were accepting new patients and only three respondents explicitly differentiated between their own patients and new referrals in stating wait times, it is difficult to draw further conclusions from the data. However if non-urgent wait times are calculated by excluding those who indicated they were not accepting new referrals or distinguished between their own patients and new referrals, wait times increase from 73 days to 82 days.

If respondents who stated they are not seeing new patients are excluded, and urgent wait times calculated for those who either indicated a single urgent wait time or specified wait times for new patients, urgent wait times increase to 23 days (based on 23 of 36 respondents).

Comments from psychiatrists centred on bed shortages, and difficulty in accessing resources for patients who need help with financial, accommodation and other needs.

Emergency Room usage by Family Physicians:

Some Family Physicians responded to the question “how soon can you book patients to be seen by the following specialists” by indicating that urgent patients were sent to Emergency:

Emergency Room Usage

	Responses Total	Patients to ER	Percent to ER
Cardiology	225	19	8.4%
Ear, Nose, Throat	185	25	13.5%
Gastroenterology	226	13	5.8%
General Internal Medicine	212	8	3.8%
General Surgeon	224	18	8.1%
Neurologist	225	7	3.1%
Neurosurgeon	172	28	16.3%
Orthopedic Surgeon	221	21	9.5%
Psychiatrist	179	34	19.0%
Urologist	251	7	2.8%

Consultation to routine surgery wait times (in days)

(from Surgical Subspecialists Survey)

Specialists \ Average wait	(2000)	(1999)	(1998)
Cardiovascular (“planned”)	132	104	
General Surgery	117	75	100
Neurosurgery	62	346	110
Ophthalmology	107	108	69
Orthopedic Surgery	134	146	106
Otolaryngology	116	155	133
Pediatric GS	67		
Plastic Surgery	205	44	103
Urology	53	94	87
Vascular Surgery	28	18	28

Consultation to urgent surgery wait times (in days)

(from Surgical Subspecialists Survey)

Specialists \ Average wait	(2000)	(1999)	(1998)
Cardiovascular (* Urgent IP; ** Urgent OP)	* 7 ** 102	7 77	
General Surgery	21.9	13	15
Neurosurgery	11.6	18	16
Ophthalmology	6.9	8	4
Orthopedic Surgery	33.0	38	15
Otolaryngology	21.6	24	36
Pediatric GS	14.0		
Plastic Surgery	44.7	41	28
Urology	19.8	19	21
Vascular Surgery	9.7	7	7

Total Wait time Non-urgent for Surgical Procedures (in days)
(from Surgical Subspecialists Survey)

Specialists \ Average wait	(2000)	(1999)	(1998)
Cardiac Surgery (Planned)	222	180	
General Surgery	182	124	143
Neurosurgery	132	604	201
Ophthalmology	204	194	123
Orthopedic Surgery	264	274	114
Otolaryngology	343	350	319
Pediatric GS	100		190
Plastic Surgery	365	196	196
Urology	118	178	131
Vascular Surgery	90	101	112

Total Wait time Urgent for Surgical Procedures (in days)
(from Surgical Subspecialists Survey)

Specialists \ Average wait	(2000)	(1999)	(1998)
Cardiac Surgery (OP only)	192	156	
General Surgery	30.5	27	24
Neurosurgery	18.4	36	23
Ophthalmology	14.9	19	7
Orthopedic Surgery	55.0	73	35
Otolaryngology	30.2	44	57
Pediatric GS	16.5		16
Plastic Surgery	48.3	56	39
Urology	25.0	32	31
Vascular Surgery	15.2	16	21

“How soon can you book the following?”

(from Family Physicians Survey) and

“Are you experiencing any delay in access to the following services?”

(from Medical/Surgical Specialists Survey)

CAT Scan Waiting Time (in days)

	Family Physician	Medical Specialist	Surgical Specialist	Average (2000)	Average (1999)	Average (1998)
Average	72	75	64	70.3	52.2	35
Median	60	60	58	59.3	41.1	
Mode	90		60	75.0	55.2	

MRI Scan Waiting Time (in days)

	Medical Specialist	Surgical Specialist	Average (2000)	Average (1999)	Average (1998)
Average	116	102	109	128	132
Median	105	90	98	129	
Mode	180	90	135	182	

EMG Study Waiting Time (in days)

	Family Physician	Medical Specialist	Surgical Specialist	Average (2000)	Average (1999)	Average (1998)
Average	20	72	68	53.3	72.1	72.0
Median	60	60	60	60.0	78.4	
Mode	60	90	60	70.0	91.0	

Ultrasound Waiting Time (in days)

	Family Physician	Medical Specialist	Surgical Specialist	Average (2000)	Average (1999)	Average (1998)
Average	66	28	29	41.0	32.7	19.7
Median	18	21	28	22.3	24.5	16.4
Mode	21	14		17.5	24.5	16.6

“Do you deliver babies?” (from Family Physicians Survey)

299 out of 312 95.8%

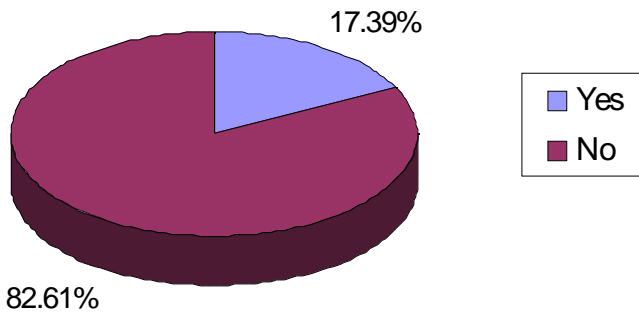


Figure 5: Physicians Delivering Babies

The number of Family Physicians who deliver babies has decreased slightly from 19.7% in 1999.

“Do you work in a continuing care institution?” (from Family Physicians Survey)

297 out of 312 95.2%

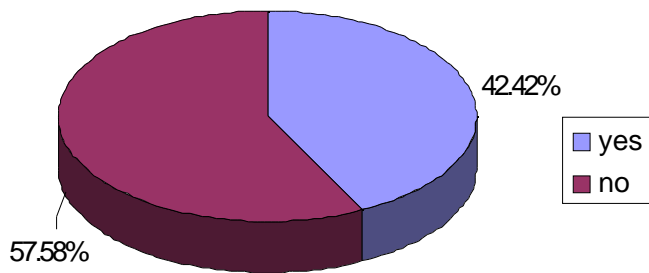


Figure 6: Physicians in continuing care institutions

In 1999, 48% of physicians indicated that they worked in a continuing care institution.

“Do you make home visits?” (from Family Physicians Survey)

Response: 298 out of 312 95.5%

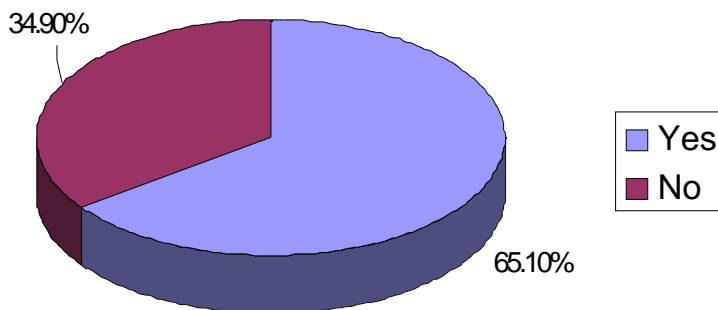


Figure 7: Physicians who make home visits

In 1999, 74.5% of respondents indicated that they make home visits.

“Are you actively recruiting new physicians to your practice?”
(from Family Physicians Survey)
Response: 189 out of 312 60.6%

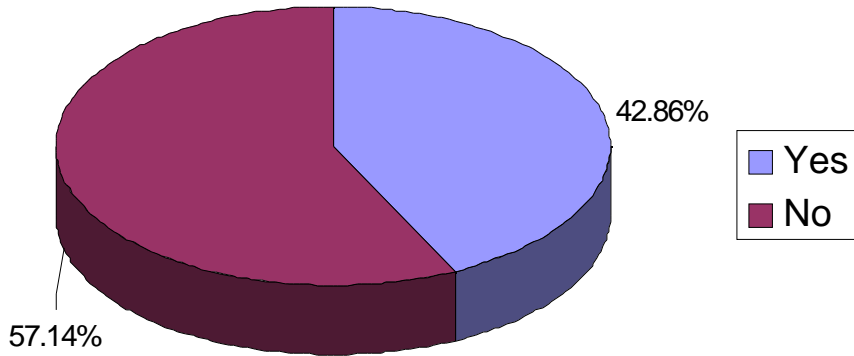


Figure 8: Physicians who actively recruit new physicians for their practice.

“Are you experiencing difficulties in finding specialists who will accept referrals?” (from Family Physicians Survey)
Response: 289 out of 312 92.7%

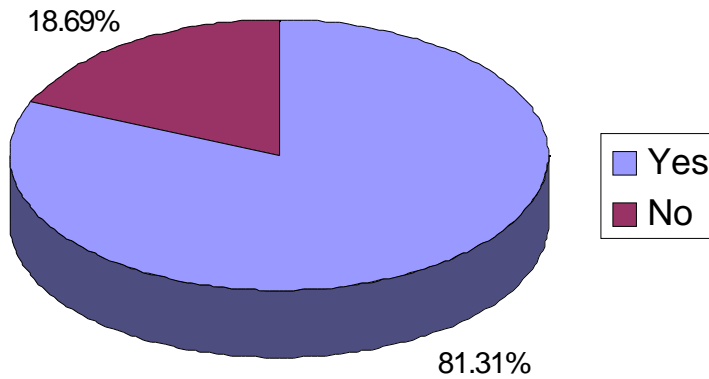


Figure 9: Physicians who are having trouble finding specialist.

Other comments from the Family Physician Survey

Family physicians commented that they and their office staff spend a significant amount of time referrals with specialists. They stated that many specialists require a letter before the referral will be accepted, and that they then may have to wait many months before they receive a response. In some cases the referral is then refused after a long wait. For urgent cases many physicians sent their patients to emergency to shorten wait times.

Other comments from the family physicians include:

- “Access to specialists has deteriorated significantly since the Klein health care cuts started in 1993. It is absurd that in a center servicing 1,000,000 people or more that patients have to wait so long to access certain specialists.”
- “difficulty finding orthopedic surgeons to accept referral of patients with back problems;
- “most specialists like to see a referral letter first before booking, you do not hear from them until a few months later, by then the patient is either improved or dead”
- “it is frustrating - my staff have to wait a long time on hold on the phone. This ties up a lot of their time. It decreases the efficiency of the office.”
- “excessively long waits, hard to find specialists taking new patients, referral letters needed”.

Other delays reported by Medical Specialists:

- Angiogram
- Audiology : 6-8 months
- Biophysical profile
- Dialysis
- EEG (6 responses): 2 weeks – 6 months
- Echocardiograms (4 responses): 4-6 months
- Endoscopy (3 responses): 2-3 months
- Modified Barium swallow: 8 weeks
- Nuclear Medicine including Thyroid Scan
- Sleep studies (2 responses)

Comments from the Medical Specialists Survey:

- “6 months plus for menopause clinic; one to two years for pelvic pain clinic”
- “3 months for a CAT scan is absolutely appalling”
- “beds - very difficult to provide for the children of Northern Alberta; delayed admission to PICU and cancelled surgeries are frequent”; delay for echocardiograms. “in addition to above time problems, considerable time is required on the phone”
- “It is possible to get these tests fairly quickly by direct contact with Radiologist!!!”
- “It's the poor patients who need patience!”
- “Severe lengthy waiting lists of months for mental health services for children and adolescents”; also delays for developmental issues and pediatric ophthalmology;
- Several comments about long waits for Otolaryngology.
- “MRI is increasingly important for neurological diagnosis - not only is there a waiting period, but we are not yet up to date on method and reading of brain imaging of very young children”

- “The major delay is still finding beds, not due to lack of beds but lack of staffing”
- “Ultrasound is usually avoided because wait too long”
- “Urgent patients can be seen quickly but only at the expense of overwork and long days”
- “Very difficult to get obstetrical and pelvic ultrasound”
- “We have had to transfer babies out of region & out of province more frequently since May”

Other delays reported by Surgical Specialists:

- Audiology
- Bone scans: 1-2 weeks
- EEG (2 responses: 8 weeks)
- Urodynamics: 2-3 months
- Vascular lab: 2-3 months

Other comments from the Surgical Specialists Survey

- “Glaucoma referral – 2 months”
- “It takes my office staff 4-6 phone calls to do the servicing after each patient consultation”
- Totally unacceptable. The wait time is now longer than when the last survey was done. What is the point of these surveys if nothing is done to shorten the waiting time. You could probably get a CAT scan done quicker in a 3rd world country.”
- “We have tried to recruit a pediatric ophthalmologist to Edmonton for 10 years. In that time we have lost two leaving only two. We are desperate.”