

Talk about:

The waiting times trap

nhs managers exclusive

The waiting list never gets bigger in a January. Except that it just did, and on January 31st the English waiting list stood at over 2.9 million.

Right now, in late March, we may already have passed the psychological 3 million mark (though the official figures won't reveal that for a few weeks yet). That doesn't mean 18 weeks is doomed, though the day when the targets are breached nationally has definitely got closer.

Of course the breaches won't happen everywhere at once. A proportion of specialties and providers have always breached 18 weeks, and their numbers are growing along with the size of the waiting list. The curious thing is how difficult it is to recover once you have started to breach. Why is that?

Firstly (and most obviously): If your waiting list is growing then activity is falling behind demand. So you need to increase activity or reduce demand or both. Either is difficult - especially with flat money - but it must be done. No matter how well you are managing everything else, if your waiting list is growing ever larger then you have a problem.

Secondly: By the time a service finally breaches, you have probably exhausted all the 'fire-fighting' opportunities. Theatre lists are packed with 16 and 17 week waiters, goodwill is running out for extra sessions, and bans on listing short-waiters have gone right down to the most urgent patients. If everything is that stretched, it will eventually snap as everyone accepts the failure.

Thirdly: The admitted patients target makes it harder to recover 18 weeks once you have breached. It requires you to treat 9 short waiters for every long-waiter, so it's tough to clear the backlog. Thankfully it is not enforced as fiercely as it was, but it is very much still there.

What does this all add up to? You need to know, at subspecialty level, the size of waiting list above which your service cannot sustain the 18 week targets. Nothing else will give you enough early warning. Watch your list sizes like a hawk, and if a list starts approaching the limit unexpectedly: do something.

Because the waiting times targets are a trap. Once you've fallen foul of them, it's hard to escape. And that's partly, though not entirely, the fault of the targets themselves.



Comment from Rob Findlay at Gooroo
20.03.2014

Read Rob's blog on the 18-week stats now at hsj.co.uk/rob-findlay

or from Monday get the un-paywalled version at blog.nhsgooroo.co.uk

Hi

Contact Gooroo
>> nhsgooroo.co.uk
>> info@nhsgooroo.co.uk
>> 01743 232149



Another waiting list initiative?

Firefighting the month-end just doesn't cut it anymore. Now you can have week-by-week plans across all the scenarios you need, as far into the future as you like. Best of all, they can update automatically. So you get plans you can trust, and computers do all the work.

Gooroo capacity planning for the NHS: **the benefit of hindsight**

