

RCEM Explains



Breach Exemptions: Patients Excluded from Four-hour NHS Wales Performance Data

Hospitals in Wales are dangerously overcrowded, and patients are experiencing extremely long waits in emergency departments (EDs). Accurate performance data is key to improving the NHS and bringing these waiting times down. In Wales, we are not seeing the full picture. The 'breach exemptions' policy means that every year, tens of thousands of patients are removed from the [Stats Wales statistics](#) of people waiting for more than four hours.

We call on the Government to publish figures without the application of breach exemptions.

Key insights

- From January to June 2023, more than **45,000 patients – 12% of all ED attendances during this period – were removed from more than four-hour waiting figures.** The recorded proportion of people who waited more than four hours was 38.7% whilst the actual figure was 50.7%.
- From January 2012 to June 2023, more than 670,000 people – nearly a quarter of all patients (23%) who waited longer than four hours – have been removed from the published four-hour waiting time figures (8% of all ED attendances).
- We surveyed senior Emergency Medicine (EM) clinicians in Wales, all of whom said that Public Health Wales should publish pre-exemption figures.

Why is performance data important?

Long waiting times in EDs are directly related to worse patient outcomes. In Wales, 4-, 8-, and 12-hour waiting time figures are a means of measuring performance, with a target set to admit, transfer, or discharge 95% of patients within four hours from their time of arrival. Recent data reveals the level of poor performance: in July 2023 only 60.3% of patients were admitted, transferred, or discharged within four hours.

In our [Resuscitate Emergency Care](#) campaign we explained why meaningful and transparent metrics are so important to facilitating improvements in the quality and safety of care. Accurate data is integral to identifying the policies that need to change and those that need to be introduced. Furthermore, ED waiting time data provides a barometer for the wider pressures experienced by the NHS.

What are breach exemptions?

Introduced in 2011, breach exemptions occur when a clinician decides that the safest place for a patient is the ED. The patient's time in the ED is stopped when the clinician decides this, and they are subsequently not included in the more than four hour waiting time figures. NHS Wales only publishes the performance figures after patients have been removed.

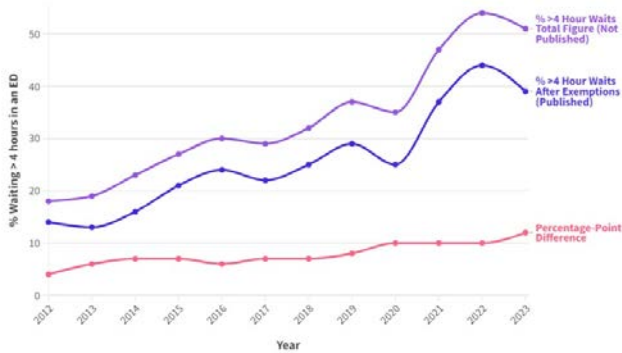
Using the published data from Stats Wales and data that we received from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from each Health Board, we can see the disparity between recorded and hidden patients.¹

The data shows that, from January 2012 to June 2023, over 670,000 patients who waited longer than four hours in an ED – 23% of all patients who waited this long – have been removed from the figures. The graph

¹ Pre-April 2019, Princess of Wales Hospital breach exemptions were not available. This only reduces the difference.

below highlights a huge gap between recorded and hidden figures since 2012.

Percentage of People Waiting for More than Four Hours in an ED: Pre- and Post-Breach Exemptions



Source: Public Health Wales and Welsh Health Boards • (2023 data is Jan - June)



So far in 2023, data published by Stats Wales suggest that 38.7% of all attendees have waited more than four hours from their arrival in an ED to admission, transfer, or discharge. However, using the total figure before patients were removed, we can see that 50.7% of patients have waited this long. That is a 12 percentage-point and 45,757 patient difference. The average annual percentage-point difference between published four hour waits and total hidden waits since 2012, is 8%. This annual difference has increased consistently over time.

Why they need to change?

The data published by Public Health Wales is inaccurate and conceals the true extent of resource and capacity issues facing the Welsh NHS.

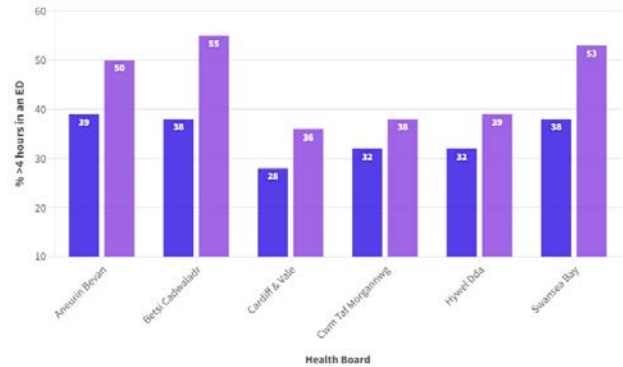
Even though there may be occasions where a patient should stay in an in ED for clinical reasons, we hear anecdotally that cases are over-recorded. Consultants tell us they are being encouraged and sometimes 'pressured' to exempt patients by their hospital or board. The large difference between recorded and real figures is evidence of this.

Indeed, the application of the policy across the Health Boards is not consistent. This leads to confusion about what constitutes an exemption and when someone should be removed from the figures.

Regional rates of application vary significantly. Between April 2019 and June 2023, the percentage point difference between Swansea Bay University Health

Board's published four-hour figures and the actual amount of people who waited this long is more than double that of Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (14.7% in Swansea and 6.7% in Cwm Taf).

Percentage Four-Hour Waits in EDs by Health Board: Published vs Actual (Apr 2019-June 2023)



Source: Public Health Wales and Welsh Health Boards



We asked EM Clinical Leads and consultants in Wales what they thought of breach exemptions. 82% of those surveyed had a negative view of breach exemptions and 100% of those surveyed thought that NHS Wales should publish pre-exemption figures, either solely or as well as breach exemptions. 55% of leads said that NHS Wales should publish both pre- and post-exempted 12-hour waits and 45% said that we should only publish pre-exempted 12-hour waits.

Recommendation

We call on the Welsh Government to publish NHS Emergency Department waiting time data without the application of breach exemptions, as a matter of urgency.

How you can support us

Help us to raise this important matter in the Senedd by tabling questions and meeting with us. For questions or support, contact us at freddie.stoker@rcem.ac.uk.