



**The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP  
Minister for Health**

The Hon John Murphy MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Petitions  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Murphy

Thank you for your letter of 29 November 2012 regarding the petition to the House of Representatives raising the issues of pension eligibility for extended absence from Australia, cost of living pressures and waiting times for medical services.

As the Minister for Health, I would like to directly address the third element of the petition:

***“We therefore ask the House to request the Government to...***

***3. Examine the factors contributing to the time residents wait for medical procedures in the public health sector.”***

Waiting times for public health services is a very important issue to the Australian Government. To this end, the Australian Government has implemented a series of reforms to ensure states and territories are accountable for measurable improvements in public hospital waiting times.

The National Partnership Agreement on Improving Public Hospital Services provides funding and incentives to states and territories to improve public hospital waiting times through the National Emergency Access Target (NEAT) and the National Elective Surgery Target (NEST).

The NEAT commenced on 1 January 2012 to increase the proportion of emergency department patients who are admitted, transferred or discharged within four hours. The final target for the NEAT is 90 per cent by 2015, with up to \$200 million in reward funding available to states and territories who achieve performance targets for emergency departments between 2012 and 2016 calendar years.

The NEST also commenced on 1 January 2012 and aims to increase the proportion of patients treated within the clinically recommended time, and reduce the number of patients who are overdue for surgery. Up to \$200 million in reward funding is available to states and territories who achieve performance targets for elective surgery between 2012 and 2016 calendar years.

The National Partnership Agreement also provides states and territories with funding to deliver and operate over 1,300 new subacute beds and equivalent services by 2013-14. These services will increase capacity in the public hospital system and allow patients to be treated in the most appropriate setting.

The Performance and Accountability Framework further holds the states and territories accountable for managing and addressing public hospital waiting times. The states and territories are required to report against 17 indicators, including five indicators that directly relate to access and waiting times, namely:

1. Access to services by type of service compared to need;
2. Emergency department waiting times by urgency category;
3. Percentage of emergency department patients transferred to a ward or discharged within four hours, by triage category;
4. Elective surgery patient waiting times by urgency category; and
5. Cancer care pathway – waiting times for cancer care.

The Australian Government is also doing its part to improve access to health services through its primary care reforms, including the establishment of Medicare locals. These organisations are also held accountable through the Performance and Accountability Framework, which includes 15 indicators relating to the accessibility of primary care services.

The National Hospital Performance Authority will publish regular reports on the performance of Australian and state and territory governments against the Framework.

### **Research and information**

There are a number of Australian Government sources of information that track public health waiting times and the factors that cause extended waiting times. For example,

- The MyHospitals website [www.myhospitals.gov.au](http://www.myhospitals.gov.au) publishes waiting times for elective surgery and emergency department presentations for most hospitals across Australia.
- The National Health Performance Authority will publish the Hospital Performance and Health Communities reports <http://www.nhpa.gov.au> to report against performance indicators in the Performance and Accountability Framework, including those relating to access and waiting times.
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics released findings from the Patient Experience Survey, 2011-12 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4839.0> in December 2012. Findings on waiting times for general practitioners, medical specialists and dental practitioners are reported by demographic and socioeconomic factors, such as the age and remoteness of patients.

I thank the petitioners for bringing their concerns to the attention of the House of Representatives. I trust that this information is useful and assures petitioners that the Australian Government shares their concerns and is working hard to address them.

Yours sincerely

**Tanya Plibersek**

7-2-13