



Ombudsman expresses concern about waiting time for patient's hip surgery

An investigation by the Public Services Ombudsman has found that a decision by a Health Trust not to prioritize a patient's hip surgery was reasonable and appropriate, but has criticized the Trust for not letting the man's GP know about its decision.

The Ombudsman's investigation began after the man's son made a complaint, alleging that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust had ignored a recommendation from his father's GP that his surgery should be changed from routine to urgent.

He also complained that the period between his 87 year-old father's first referral in November 2016 to expected surgery in June 2018 (some 20 months) was an unreasonable time to wait.

In response to the Ombudsman's enquiries, the Trust stated it is not uncommon for patients who are referred as an urgent patient by their GP to be downgraded to routine once assessed by an Orthopaedic specialist.

The Ombudsman obtained the advice of an independent consultant orthopaedic surgeon, who stated that the Trust's decision not to change the status was reasonable and appropriate. Following this advice, and also after assessing the criteria used by the Trust to assess patients for hip replacement surgery, this element of the complaint was not upheld.

However, the Ombudsman referred to the 'open and accountable' principle of good administration which requires public bodies to state the criteria for decision making and to give full reasons to their customers for their decisions. She decided that it would have been good medical practice to inform the GP about the consultant's decision, as well as an act of professionalism and common courtesy.

As a result of this failure to inform, the patient experienced the injustice of uncertainty and frustration as to the status of his referral. The Ombudsman recommend that the Trust revises its practice to ensure in future GP's and patients are advised of the outcome of all referrals, including requests made by a GP to reconsider a patient's referral category.

In relation to the issue of waiting times, the Trust stated that unfortunately there is a very high demand for orthopaedic surgery and that this currently exceeds its available capacity. It apologized for the delay experienced by the complainant's father, but stressed that it is required to ensure urgent patients are treated as priority in order to protect patient safety.

It is also required to ensure that all patients are seen and treated in chronological order in compliance with guidelines.

As a general comment on this matter, the Ombudsman said that it was 'wholly unacceptable and a matter of grave concern' to expect an 87 year old man to wait so long for surgery. However, she also added that she recognised the particular funding challenges facing this and other Trusts in Northern Ireland which contributed to the delays.

The full investigation report can be viewed [here](#).