

*Healthcare services are improving*

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**Timeframes for access to  
non-emergency treatment**



■ MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND HEALTH

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## *Immediate access to first aid and urgent treatment*

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Patients in need of urgent treatment receive immediate attention. For example, patients who have been seriously injured in an accident or who have suffered a heart attack are treated immediately. People who are seriously ill, such as cancer patients, are also treated as soon as possible.

## *Faster access to non-urgent treatment*

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From the beginning of March 2005, non-urgent examinations and treatment at health centres and hospitals must be provided within clear timeframes.

## *Examinations and treatment at health centres*

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Patients must be able to contact their health centre immediately by phone during normal opening hours. At other times, the health centre must arrange an emergency service.

The form of care needed must be assessed at the health centre within three days of patients making initial contact.

The required treatment may also be assessed by some other healthcare professional than a doctor. Often, healthcare professionals can judge during the phone conversation whether the caller needs to visit the health centre to be assessed for treatment or whether instructions can be given by phone. The assessment of what treatment is needed and individual care instructions are recorded in the patient's files. If the assessment requires a visit to the health centre, an appointment will be arranged within three days of the patient contacting the health centre.

Treatment at a health centre will usually begin with the first visit. Examinations and treatment that cannot be given at this stage must be provided within three months. Some health centres provide specialized medical care, such as surgical procedures. In such cases, the treatment timeframes applying to specialized medical care will be used, whereby access to treatment must be given within six months.

## *Examinations and treatment in hospital*

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Assessments of hospital treatment needs must be made within three weeks. These are done by referral or when a patient is

called for an assessment at a hospital's out-patients department. If the assessment is done on the basis of referral, the patient must be informed of the examination schedule within three weeks. If, on the basis of these examinations, the doctor decides that the patient needs hospital care, this must be initiated within six months. The patient will be told well in advance when and where treatment will be provided.

Access to mental health treatment considered necessary for children and young people must be given within three months.

## *Healthcare provides necessary and effective treatment*

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There has been great variation in treatment practices across the country and decisions concerning treatment have been made on differing grounds. Certain surgical operations have been carried out far more frequently in relation to population size in some hospitals than in others. Such significant differences cannot be explained by disparities in the health of the population.

The aim is to provide treatment fairly, irrespective of where people live. Teams of experts appointed by the Ministry of

Social Affairs and Health have drawn up national guidelines on principles for treating illnesses. These guidelines cover some 200 illnesses and procedures. Doctors are to assess treatment needs by clarifying with patients how much pain their illnesses cause them, how much and in what situations illnesses adversely affects patients' daily lives, how well patients are able to move about or, in the case of eye diseases, how well they can see. There are different sets of questions for different illnesses for assessing a patient's health. Doctors are also to consider patients' individual life situations when deciding on the provision of treatment.

The hospital districts and health centres assess and monitor the practical implementation of the guidelines, and develop them as needed.

### *Doctors decide on treatment given to each patient individually*

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As before, doctors will decide on the treatment given to patients. They will, however, take into account the recommendations of expert groups. Doctors will discuss different treatment options with patients, but patients are not entitled to a particular form of treatment unless the

doctor considers it necessary. Patients are entitled to refuse treatment.

### *Patients treated within a timeframe*

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Patients will be notified when and where they will receive treatment. If the time and place of the treatment changes, they are to be told why. Health centre and hospital waiting lists can also be monitored, as this information is now in the public domain. Information on health centre and hospital waiting lists has to be publicized either on the Internet or in local newspapers at least every six months. Waiting list information does not contain any details on individual patients.

### *Treatment outside the local municipality*

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If the patient's own health centre or hospital is not able to provide the necessary treatment within the set timeframe, it must arrange the option of treatment in another municipality or in private health-care. Patients will pay the same treatment fees as in their own hospital or health centre.

If examinations or treatment are delayed, patients may not seek treatment

elsewhere than from their local hospital or health centre. If necessary, the hospital district can arrange treatment elsewhere.

If patients use private healthcare services at their own initiative, part of the cost will be covered by health insurance.

## *Oral healthcare*

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Patients must be able to contact their health centre immediately by phone during office hours concerning oral healthcare. The need for oral treatment is often assessed during this initial contact, when a dental nurse will establish the reason for making contact, the symptoms and their severity and the urgency of treatment. The dental nurse will refer clients either to a dentist or a dental hygienist, and if needed can give instructions for treatment over the phone. Dental hygienists also carry out oral check-ups. The assessment and instructions for treatment are recorded in patients' files.

Any treatment that is considered odontologically necessary must be provided in a reasonable timeframe, within six months at the latest. Based on their examinations, dentists will decide on the types of treatment needed and discuss the various treatment options with patients. Patients are not entitled to any type of



treatment they want, and dentists decide whether treatment is needed. Patients will receive oral healthcare according to individual treatment plans. The time between appointments may often be longer than a year. But urgent treatment must be provided immediately.

Standardized principles have also been drawn up for oral healthcare. Special attention is given to preventative care.

If patients use private dental services, part of the treatment costs will be covered by health insurance.

### *What to do if access to treatment is not given within the set timeframe?*

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The timeframes for non-emergency treatment take effect from the beginning of March 2005. Some health centres and hospitals may initially find it difficult to meet the statutory timeframes, but all healthcare units will try their best to do so as soon as possible.

The medical directors of health centres and hospitals are responsible for carrying out the new treatment guidelines and for ensuring that patients are examined and treated within the specified timeframe. If patients do not receive the treatment the doctor considers necessary at their own

health centre or hospital within the set timeframe, and care is not provided elsewhere, they can complain to the medical director of the health centre or the hospital. Patient ombudsmen at health centres and hospitals also advise on issues concerning treatment times. Ultimately, appeals on treatment delays can be made to the State Provincial Office. However, processing appeals takes time, so it is advisable to first try to solve problems at the healthcare unit where they arose.

Patient must receive the treatment doctors consider necessary within the set timeframe. Patients do not have the right to receive any type of treatment they want. If they feel that treatment has not been given as it should have been, they can contact a patient ombudsman to discuss possible further measures. Patients can complain to the medical director of their health centre or hospital or appeal to the State Provincial Office. When making its decision, the State Provincial Office will hear experts in the field and will take into account the accepted guidelines concerning access to medical care.

## *Significant reform*

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The provision of care within specific timeframes and related legislation regarding patient records, information and monitoring systems are the most significant healthcare reform in a long time. This reform standardizes the grounds for access to treatment for the entire country. Expert recommendations enable doctors to decide effectively on the best treatment to achieve the desired results for each patient. Most importantly, all patients waiting for treatment prescribed by doctors will be cared for without being stuck on waiting lists for years on end.