



Cancer treatment was the most frequent reason in November for patients being referred by the Ministry of Health for medical care outside of Gaza – but access is never assured: only 58.76% of requests for permits submitted by cancer patients for travel in November were approved.



Eman Shannan (right), head of the Aid and Hope Program for Cancer Patients Care, advocates for cancer patients at WHO's launch of its latest annual report on health access, in Gaza, November 29
© WHO

Health Access for Referral Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: 11
(published January 11, 2017)

Summary: November 2016

Difficulties of access through Erez crossing

- **High volume of repeat permit requests:** The sharp increase of total applications in November reflects the high number of reapplications for patients who were denied or delayed in previous months.
- **Permit approval rates critically low:** Of 2,794 patient permit applications to exit Gaza through Erez checkpoint for hospital appointments in November, 50.18% were approved. October (with 44.08% approved) and November represent the lowest and second lowest approval rates, respectively, recorded by WHO since April 2009. 169 patients (6.05%) were denied permits, including 13 children and 13 elderly persons over 60 years. Among those denied was a patient requiring urgent heart surgery. 1,223 patients (43.77%) received no response, including 323 children and 130 elderly people over 60 (Palestinian District Liaison office in Gaza).
- **Most patients' companions are denied/delayed permits:** The approval rate for permit applications of patient companions was 42.7%; about 7% of the companions were denied permits and the remaining 50% were still pending at the time of the patients' hospital dates.
- **Security interrogations:** 33 patients, among them 14 females, were requested by the General Security Services for interviews at Erez during November. 11 were approved.
- **Humanitarian health workers through Erez:** Of 18 WHO requests, only nine (50%) were approved. 4 were denied and 5 were pending.

Limited Rafah exit in November

- **Access to Egypt:** According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open in both directions for 5 days in November allowing 100 patients to travel for health reasons to Egypt. 8 pallets of drugs donated by an Egyptian pharmaceutical company entered Gaza.

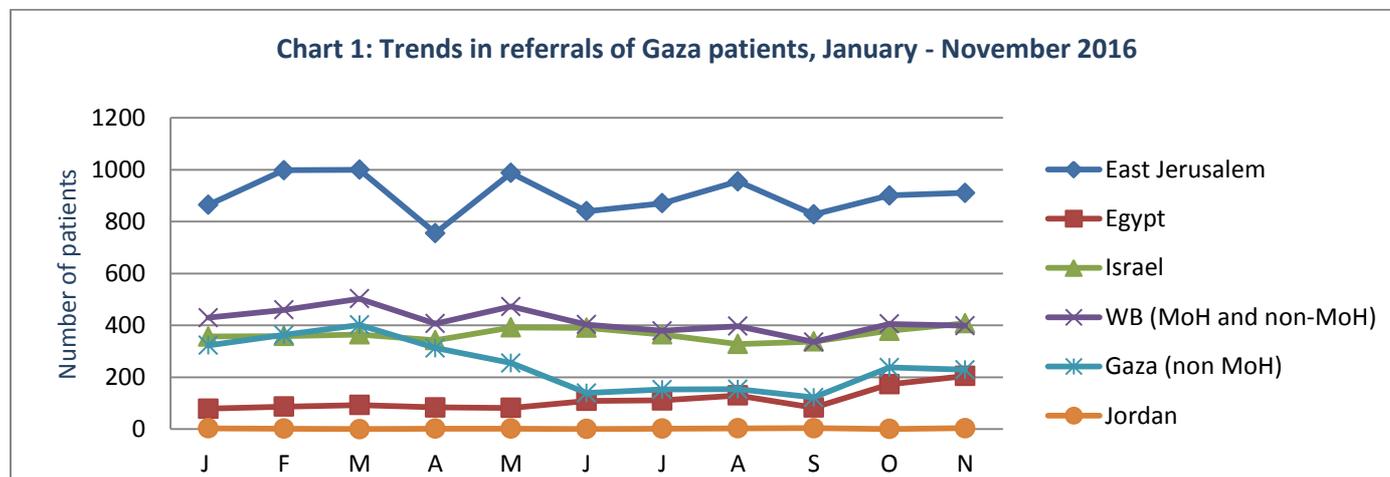
Ministry of Health referrals in November

- **Financial coverage:** The Ministry of Health issued 2,156 referral decisions (benefiting 1,941 patients) in November for outside care with an estimated cost of **NIS 9,783,322**. The top 5 needed specialties for Gaza patients were in oncology, paediatrics, haematology, ophthalmology, and orthopaedics.

MoH Referrals in November

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 2,156 referrals for Gaza patients (representing 1,941 individuals) in November, according to the Medical Referral Directorate data in Ramallah (**Table 1**), 8.3% higher than the monthly average in 2015. 44.2% were female patients and 55.8% were male patients; 30% were children aged 0 to 17 years and 21% were elderly patients over 60 years old. Referrals were mainly for: oncology - 496 patients (23%), pediatrics - 161 (7.5%), hematology - 158 (7.4%), ophthalmology - 148 (7%), orthopedics - 141 (6.5%), heart catheterization - 123 (5.7%), nuclear medicine - 120 (5.6%), cardiology - 87 (4%), neurosurgery - 66 (3%), general surgery - 64 (3%) and the remaining 529 referrals (24.5%) were for 21 other specialties.

Chart 1: Trends in referrals of Gaza patients, January - November 2016



Most referrals were to East Jerusalem hospitals (42%). Other referrals were to Israeli hospitals (19%), West Bank (18.5%), and to medical centers within Gaza (10.6%). Referrals to Egypt (9.5%) were the highest of the year, reflecting the recent open days at the Rafah border, Chart 1 and Table 1.

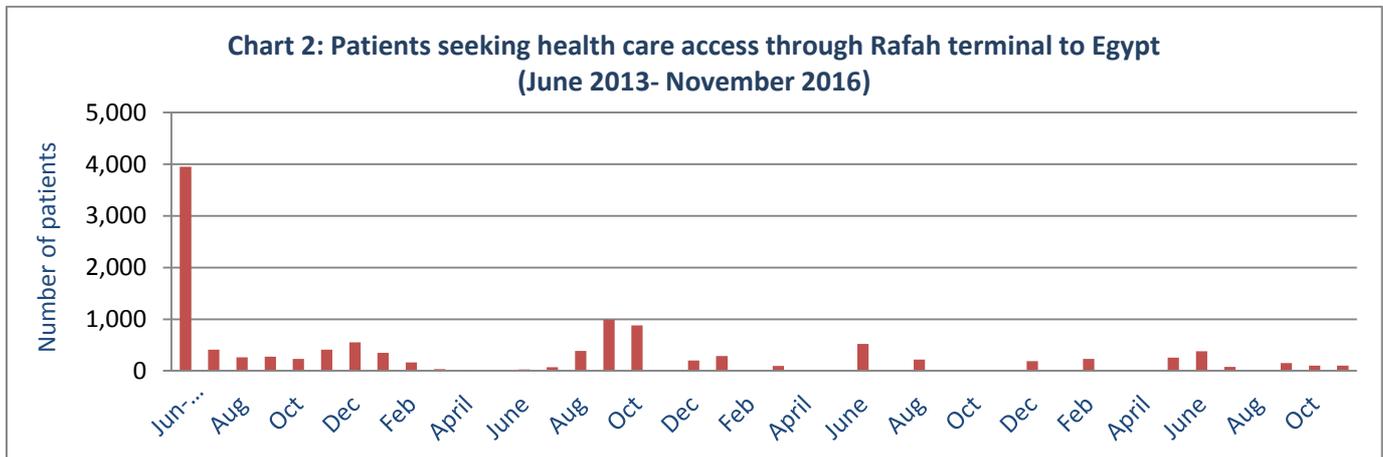
Table 1: Monthly referrals of Gaza patients 2016 (number and %)

Referral destination		Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Total
Gaza (non-MoH)	N	323	363	402	313	255	139	153	154	122	238	229	2,691
	%	15.7	16	17.01	16.43	11.63	7.38	8.13	7.83	7.13	11.34	10.62	11.97
WB (MoH / non-MoH)	N	430	460	503	407	473	403	379	397	336	406	399	4,593
	%	20.90	20.27	21.29	21.36	21.58	21.4	20.15	20.18	19.64	19.35	18.51	20.43
East Jerusalem	N	865	998	1,000	756	988	840	871	955	828	901	911	9,913
	%	42.05	43.98	42.32	39.69	45.07	44.61	46.31	48.55	48.39	42.95	42.25	44.09
Jordan	N	3	2	0	2	2	1	2	3	4	1	4	24
	%	0.15	0.09	0.00	0.10	0.09	0.05	0.11	0.15	0.23	0.05	0.19	0.11
Israel	N	357	359	365	343	392	391	365	328	338	379	408	4,025
	%	17.36	15.82	15.45	18.01	17.88	20.76	19.4	16.68	19.75	18.06	18.92	17.9
Egypt	N	79	84	93	84	82	109	111	130	83	173	205	1,236
	%	3.84	3.83	3.94	4.41	3.73	5.79	5.9	6.61	4.85	8.25	9.51	5.5
Total		2,057	2,269	2,363	1,905	2,192	1,883	1,881	1,967	1,711	2,098	2,156	22,482

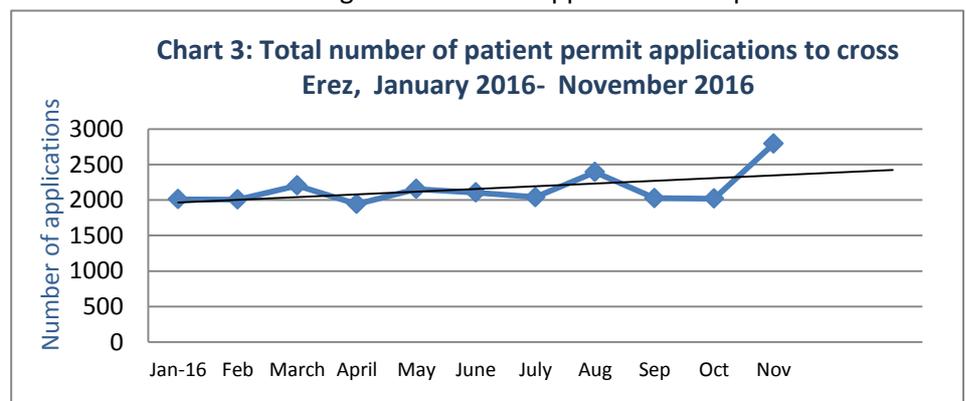
Source: MoH Medical Referral Directorate, Ramallah, November 6, 2016

The Special Purchasing Unit in Ramallah estimated the cost of the 2,156 referrals to be NIS 9,783,322 for Gaza patients in November. Of total referrals in November, 1,722 (79.9%) required Israeli permits for access through Erez checkpoint and 205 (9.5%) required approval from Egypt to exit through Rafah (and the Rafah border to be accessible).

Limited access to Egypt during November: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the Rafah border terminal was open on 5 days during November for humanitarian cases, and 4 additional days for political and media delegates only. A total of 2,786 travellers crossed to Egypt. Of these, 100 reported they were travelling for health reasons with 39 companions. 10 of the patients, with 14 companions, were transferred by ambulance. The Egyptian authorities allowed the entry of 8 pallets of drugs donated by SEDICO, an Egyptian pharmaceutical company, to the Ministry of Health. No medical delegates entered Gaza during the month. Between January and November 2016, the Rafah crossing has been open only 32 days for humanitarian cases, allowing only 1,289 patients (217 by ambulance) to travel into Egypt for health care. Before the July 2013 closure, more than 4,000 Gaza residents crossed Rafah terminal to Egypt monthly for health-related reasons, Chart 2.



Erez crossing permit approval rates = second lowest in 7 years: In November, there were 2,794 applications from patients for permits to cross Erez for health care, 51% higher than the monthly average in 2015 (1,845). The sharp increase of total applications in November reflects the high number of reapplications for patients who were denied or delayed in the previous months, Chart 3. About 25% (693) of the patient applications in November were repeated attempts of patients to cross Erez: 4 attempts for 3 patients, 3 attempts for 29 patients, 2 attempts for 297 patients. The remaining 75% (2,101) applications represented single attempts by patients during the month.



Of the total permit applications, 78.4% were for medical care in the occupied Palestinian territory: 1,480 (53%) were for patients seeking treatment in East Jerusalem hospitals, 711 (25.5%) in the West Bank hospitals, 595 (21.2%) in Israeli hospitals, and 8 (0.30%) in Jordanian hospitals.

The top receiving hospitals in November were Makassed, 711 (25.5%) and Augusta Victoria, 547 (19.6%) in East Jerusalem; Najah University in Nablus, 235 (8.4%); Tel-Hashomir, 152 (5.4%) in I and Hadassah, 151 (5.4%) in West Jerusalem Israel; St. John hospital, 142 (5.1%) in East Jerusalem; Msalam center, 138 (4.9%) in Ramallah; Ichilov hospital 93 (3.3%) and Assuta hospital, 84 (3%) in Tel-Aviv, Israel; Al-Ahli hospital in Hebron, 81 (2.9%). The remaining 460 (16.5%) were to 31 other hospitals and medical centers.

In November, the Palestinian District Coordination office reported that 50.18% of applications for patients' permits were approved, a slight improvement compared to (October's approval rate of 44%, the lowest rate since April 2009) but considerably lower than the monthly average in 2015 of 76.7% (Table 2). 169 applicants (6.1%) were denied access and 1,223 (43.8%) did not receive an answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments, delaying their medical care. 33 patients were requested for security interviews with the Israeli security.

Of patients applying for permits to cross Erez, 94.6% received referrals from the Ministry of Health, 3.1% were self-funded, 1.36% were supported by Noor Ala Al-alam charity, 0.5% by PHR-Israel and the remaining 0.46% by other organizations. 10% of applicants were children aged 0-3 years, 20% children aged 4-17, 25% adults aged 18-40 years, 29% adults aged 41-60 years and 15% aged over 60 years.

Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, November 2016

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	104	171	57	113	0	1	47	57	0	0
4 - 17	228	347	133	211	2	10	93	126	0	0
18- 40	329	379	143	106	23	60	163	213	8	13
41 - 60	387	422	190	165	21	39	176	218	5	3
Over 60	193	234	144	140	4	9	45	85	1	3
Sub-total	1241	1553	667	735	50	119	524	699	14	19
Total	2794		1,402 (50.18%)		169 (6.05%)		1,223 (43.77%)		33 (1.18%)	

* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, Ministry of Health, Gaza.

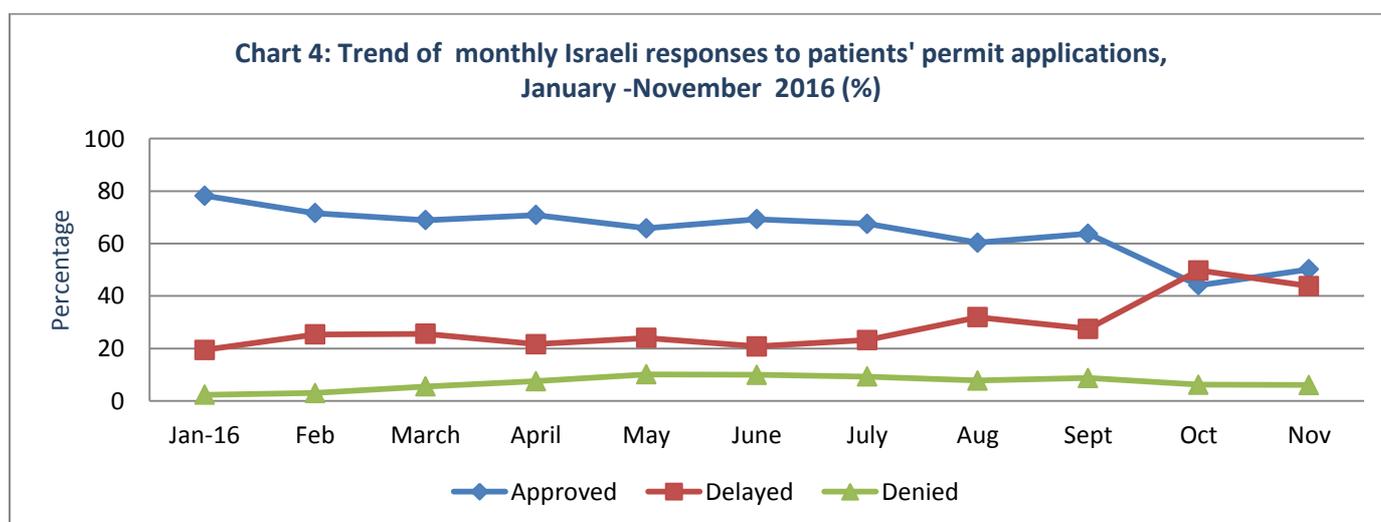
The total number of patients' permit applications submitted from January to November 2016 was 23.4% higher than the corresponding period in 2015 while the approval rate was 11.4% lower (Table 3). In 2016, the denial rate was 0.73% higher and the delayed rate was 10.7% higher than in 2015. The number of patients requested for security interviews increased 3.6 times.

Table 3: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by sex of applicant, 2016 compared to 2015

Period	January-November 2015		January–November 2016	
Total	20,337		25,092	
	(F:9,469; M:10,868)		(F:11,420;M:13,672)	
Approved	15,759	77.49%	16,582	66.08%
	(F:7,783; M:7,976)		(F:7,993 ;M:8,589)	
Denied	1,190	5.85%	1,650	6.58%
	(F:381; M:809)		(F:504;M:1,146)	
Delayed	3,388	16.66%	6,860	27.34%
	(F:1,305; M:2,083)		(F:2,923 ;M:3,937)	
GSS	169 (F:38; M:131)	0.83%	602 (F:202;M:400)	2.4%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Israeli approvals of permits have declined steadily in 2016 from a high in January of 78.2% to a low of 44.1% in October, increasing slightly in November to 50.18% (Chart 4). The likely cause of the rise in delays is an increase in Israeli security procedures for both patients and companions. **A delayed permit means delayed medical care, particularly harmful for cancer patients whose treatment protocols must be timely.**

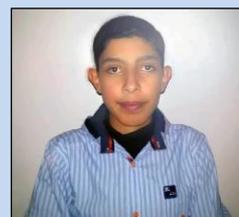


Denied care: 169 patients (119 males; 50 females) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 13 children and 13 patients over 60 years old. 86.4% of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals and 13.6% in Israel. The following specialties were needed by patients who were denied permits: orthopedics (38); oncology (20); neurosurgery (16); ophthalmology (15); ENT (12); general surgery and

nuclear medicine (10) each; internal medicine (9); cardiology (6); hematology, nephrology, and urology (5) each; pediatrics and maxillofacial surgery (4) each; chest disease (3); obstetric/gynecology and vascular surgery (2) each; chest surgery, heart catheterization and neurology (1) each.

Denied a permit: young cardiac patient who needs urgent heart surgery

Ahmed Shbair, 17 years old, requires urgent cardiac surgery for treatment of a rare congenital heart condition called “L-Transposition of the great arteries.” He was denied access to his surgical appointment at Tel Hashomir hospital in Israel in November 2016 by Israeli authorities. Both Ahmed and his mother, Amal, 52 years old, who has accompanied her son for all eight hospitalizations in Tel Hashomir since his first surgical operation at the age of one week, were denied. Currently, he needs additional surgery to replace a heart valve. “Our cardiologist in Gaza told us that Ahmed needs pulmonary valve replacement surgery as soon as possible because his heart muscle is getting weaker over time, which threatens his life,” Ahmed’s father told WHO in a phone interview.



Ahmed’s last surgery was in December 2015. In February 2016, the family submitted a request for a permit for a hospital appointment and Amal was asked to appear for a security interrogation; she was eventually approved for travel with Ahmed in April, when they visited Tel-Ha-Shomir hospital for preparation for heart surgery scheduled in November. When they applied for a permit in October, Ahmed was requested to appear for interrogation by the Israeli security as a condition to process his application. However, after the interrogation Ahmed and his mother were denied the permit.

In December the family applied again for a permit for travel in January and again Amal Shbair was requested for interrogation. She went to the appointment, but after waiting several hours at Erez crossing that day, she was sent back to Gaza without meeting security officers. Now, Ahmed and his family are anxiously waiting for a newly scheduled hospital appointment in February 2017. They say they hope they can obtain the necessary permits to access the hospital for his surgery. Ahmed is a 12th grade high school student with an excellent performance although his serious health problems force him to miss many school days. He hopes his heart condition can be treated soon so that he can return to school and have better health and a chance for a bright future.

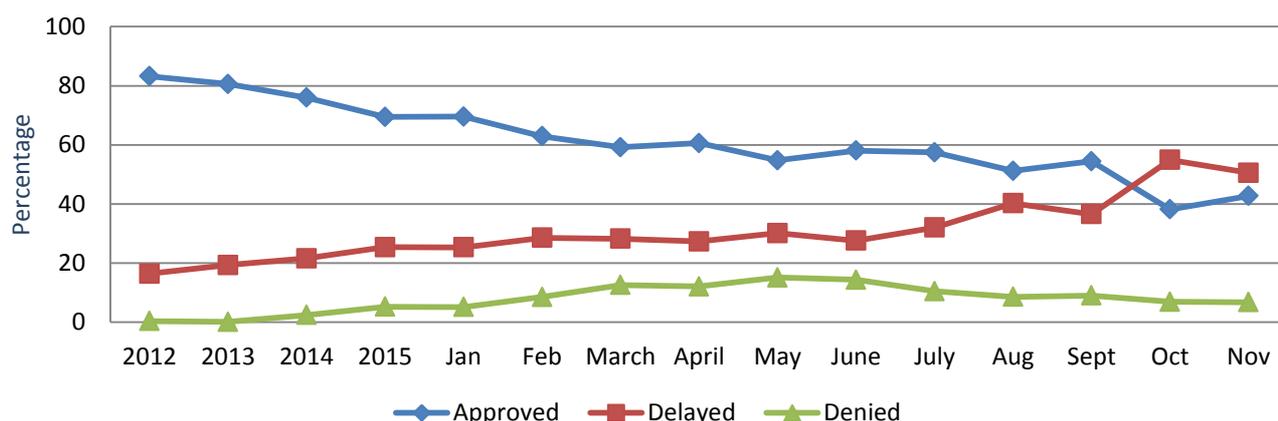
Delayed care: 1,223 patients (699 males; 524 females) were delayed in reaching health care in November, among them 323 children and 130 patients over the age of 60; those delayed received no response to their applications and consequently lost their scheduled hospital appointments. The patients had treatment appointments in: oncology (267); cardiology (129); ophthalmology (122); orthopedics (115); pediatrics (100); hematology (83); neurosurgery (57); general surgery (48); nuclear medicine (47); and urology (37); the remaining 218 (18%) referrals were for 19 other specialties.

Out of the 1,223 delayed patient applications, the status of 1,110 (91%) was pending, 46 (3.8%) were asked to change their companions, 31 (2.5%) were waiting for a response to their applications after having a security interview, 16 (1.3%) were waiting for an appointment for a security interview, 9 (0.74%) were asked to reapply, 8 (0.65%) were asked to reschedule a hospital appointment, 2 (0.16%) were denied after interview, 1 (0.08%) application was returned as ‘not suitable’. 49 patients out of those delayed in November were eventually approved late, within the first week of December 2016, requiring rescheduling of hospital appointments.

Patients need to submit their applications at least 10 days prior to the hospital appointment. In November, out of the 1,223 delayed patients 91 (7.4%) had submitted their applications 1-7 days prior to the appointment date and 413 (33.77%) submitted their application 8-14 days prior to the appointment date. However, 682 (55.8%) were still waiting after 15-30 days, and 37 (3%) waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request.

Patients’ companions: In November, 2,990 applications for relatives accompanying patients (including parents of children) were submitted to the Israeli authorities. Only one first-degree relative is permitted to accompany a Gaza patient and permits are conditional on security clearance for all persons under the age of 55 years. Approval rates for patients’ companions have declined steadily from 2012 to October 2016; in November an improvement was seen although still more permits were denied or delayed than approved: 42.7% were approved, 6.8% were denied and 50.5% were delayed and pending (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Israeli responses to applications from patients' companions, January to November 2016, compared to previous 4 years



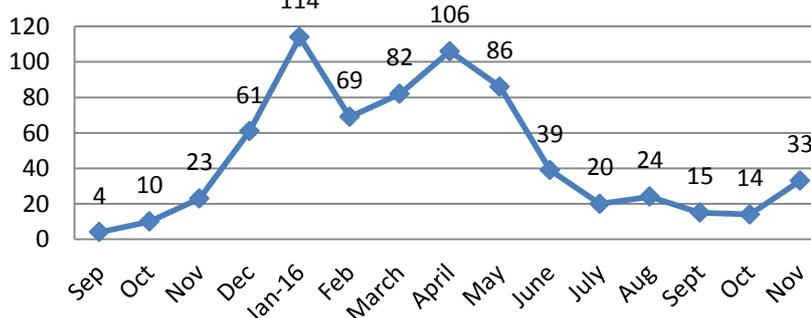
Security interviews:

33 patients (19 males; 14 females), among them one woman and three men over 60 years were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS), (Chart 6). Of the 33 patients requested by the GSS, 11 were approved after the interview.

Patients and companions cross Erez:

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,203 Gaza patients (and 1,124 companions) crossed Erez in November to access Palestinian, Israeli, or Jordanian hospitals; of these, 97 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulances, with 92 companions. Erez crossing was open for 26 days during daytime working hours and closed on 4 days (4 Saturdays) in November.

Chart 6: Patients requested for security interview, September 2015-November 2016



Humanitarian health workers access through Erez: The WHO submitted a total of 18 permit applications for health workers during November; only 9 were approved. Ten requests were for Palestinian MoH workers to exit Gaza; 4 were approved, 4 were denied and 2 were pending. Three requests were for WHO staff (Jerusalem ID holders) to enter Gaza and all were approved. Three requests were for international medical delegates, of which 2 were approved and 1 was pending. Two requests were for WHO staff to exit Gaza, both were pending.

WHO releases latest health access report for the occupied Palestinian territory:

On the occasion of International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, marked by the UN on 29 November since 1977, WHO launched a report on health access in the oPt in 2014-2015 at an event in Gaza. The report highlights how the Israeli permit system and physical barriers obstruct health access for Palestinian patients, ambulances and health workers in the West Bank and Gaza.

Full report:

[Right to health: Crossing barriers to access health in the occupied Palestinian territory, 2014-2015](#)

News release:

[English | Arabic](#)

Video of report launch in Gaza:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKaDTA1dcTo>

