



Provincial Auditor's 2023 Report – Volume 2: The Ministry of Health has not improved mounting provincial wait lists for neurosurgery services

Total wait list for spine surgery in Regina doubled since 2019–20

REGINA—December 6, 2023: In her 2023 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 14, Provincial Auditor Tara Clemett evaluated the Ministry of Health's coordination efforts with the Saskatchewan Health Authority to provide timely provincial neurosurgery services. She made eight recommendations.

Prolonged wait times to see a neurosurgeon increases the risk a patient's health condition will worsen or become irreversible. Saskatchewan's average wait to see a neurosurgery physician (i.e., neurosurgeon, orthopedic surgeon) has increased over the last two decades—about 240 patients were waiting more than a year for neurosurgery with 81 of those patients (34%) considered higher priority (expected to receive surgery in less than six weeks) at April 30, 2023.

Overall, the total wait list for spine surgery in Regina doubled since 2019–20 with 90 patients waiting more than 24 months for spine surgery, whereas Saskatoon remained unchanged. Regina had 74% of the total provincial wait list of 1,033 spine cases at March 31, 2023.

"Effective coordination of timely neurosurgery services and process improvements to reduce wait times province-wide would provide patients with the care they need in a reasonable time," said Tara Clemett.

The Ministry of Health needs to:

- Analyze the appropriate number of staff resources needed to meet neurosurgical service expectations and establish action plans to address workforce gaps. Regina was expected to complete 1,100 spine surgeries in 2022-23 and actually completed 770.
- Communicate clear performance expectations to neurosurgery physicians and monitor whether these expectations are met.
- Assess direct and pooled patient referral systems to help reduce wait times for first neurosurgical consultation. Under the pooled referral system, patients have the option of seeing the first available neurosurgeon in the pool.
- Collect and analyze complete wait time data for patients directly referred to a neurosurgery physician.
- Document clear surgery prioritization criteria (e.g., mobility, pain level) to support consistent and fair access to neurosurgery services.
- Determine enhancements to surgical scheduling (e.g., use of flex days, reduce late starts) to ensure efficient use of operating rooms.

The Ministry also needs to increase the use of Saskatchewan Spine Pathway clinic referrals (e.g., physiotherapists assess whether spine surgery needed or non-surgical, alternate treatments available) as many spine patients' conditions will resolve in time without surgery with clinic supports. In 2022–23, less than 20% of the patients assessed by the Spine Pathway required surgical consultation, suggesting more referrals to the Spine Pathway could significantly reduce the wait list for neurosurgery consultations and surgeries.

The full Provincial Auditor's 2023 Report – Volume 2 available online at auditor.sk.ca.

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- In 2022–23, neurosurgery physicians performed 2,568 surgeries with 60% of those surgeries related to the spine
- Neurosurgery consultation waits differ based on referral systems:
 - Pooled—43.4 days wait on average
 - Direct referral—151.7 days wait on average
- Regina neurosurgery physicians prioritized more spine procedures as emergent or urgent (83%) compared to Saskatoon (68%) in 2022–23
- 20 surgeons performed 3,347 neurosurgeries, with one neurosurgeon completing 362 (11%) of these surgeries from January 1, 2022, to April 30, 2023
- We found, on average, neurosurgeons made over \$850,000 in 2022–23 with fee-for-service neurosurgeons making over 50% more than contracted neurosurgeons to perform about 35% more surgeries