

## Chapter 14: Health—Coordinating the Provision of Timely Neurosurgery Services

### Why It Matters

Prolonged wait times to see a neurosurgeon increases the risk a patient's health condition will worsen or become irreversible. Patients can face economic losses and experience increased pain, suffering, and mental anguish not only while they wait to see specialists, but also while waiting for surgery that may follow diagnosis.

### Why We Did This Audit

The Ministry has not improved mounting provincial wait lists for neurosurgery services. At April 2023, more than 700 Saskatchewan patients were waiting for neurosurgery with about 240 patients waiting more than a year.

### Key Facts and Figures

- 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

### What We Found

We found fee-for-service neurosurgery physicians had triple the number of patients waiting for surgery compared to contracted physicians, and nearly twice as many operating room cancellations. These differences suggest some neurosurgeons may have too many patients, while other neurosurgeons may have capacity to treat more patients.

Clear performance expectations could support efforts to balance patient loads and treat neurosurgery patients more timely.

### Our Recommendations

The Ministry of Health needs to:

- Analyze the appropriate number of physicians and staff needed to meet neurosurgery service expectations and establish actions to address workforce gaps.
- Communicate clear performance expectations to neurosurgery physicians and monitor whether these expectations are met.
- Assess direct and pooled patient referral systems for first neurosurgical consultation. Under the pooled referral system, patients have the option of seeing the first available neurosurgeon in the pool.
- Increase the use of Saskatchewan Spine Pathway clinic referrals as many spine patients' conditions will resolve in time with clinic supports without surgery.
- 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.