

Longer waits could increase negligence claims, NHS told

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The NHS could face a rise in negligence claims because waiting times are getting longer, the spending watchdog warns today in a report that says too many beds may have been cut.

The report by the National Audit Office links the longer waits to a lack of beds, warning that the NHS has lost 8,000 since 2010.

The number of emergency readmissions to hospital within a month of a patient being sent home has risen by 14 per cent in five years. Doctors believe that the increase could be a sign of patients being sent home too soon to create space.

The report says that while "it may create efficiencies to reduce the number of beds to a certain level, after a certain point the capacity constraints this will introduce will impact on other resources such as staff and theatre usage".

NHS chiefs do not know whether the health service has passed that point, according to the report. It points out that 40 per cent of negligence claims concern delays to diagnosis or treatment, adding: "Long waiting times may lead to an increased risk of more negligence claims against the NHS."

The health service is treating more people each year but has not met its waiting time targets for non-emergency treatment since February 2016 and is planning to change them. The target is for 92 per cent of patients to be seen by a consultant within 18 weeks of referral by their GP, but in January only 86.7 per cent were seen in that time.

Key cancer treatment targets are also being missed, although the report says that this is largely because of action to increase the number of urgent cancer referrals and provide diagnoses sooner.

Figures published yesterday by NHS Digital show that readmissions to A&E within 30 days of discharge have increased from 756,020 in 2013-14 to 865,625 in 2017-18. Emergencies make up a growing share of these admissions.

Taj Hassan, president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, said: "Many patients have to be unnecessarily readmitted as they do not have the assistance they need to look after themselves after they have been discharged". The government must urgently publish its green paper on the issue, he added.

An NHS spokesman said that extra money from its new long-term plan would fund more treatment and reduce waiting times.

Times 22.3.2019