

## MANAGING EMERGENCY HOSPITAL ADMISSIONS

Mr Kieran Donnelly, the Comptroller and Auditor General, today published his report on Managing Emergency Hospital Admissions.

*Mr Donnelly said: “My report shows that emergency hospital admissions are costly and frequently avoidable. To compound matters, once admitted, many patients can remain in a hospital bed longer than is necessary.*

*With hospitals struggling to cope with increasing levels of demand for emergency care, particularly among older and chronically ill patients, ensuring that patients are treated in the most appropriate setting is crucial if the resources available for emergency care are to be used to best effect.”*

Tackling the challenges presented by emergency care has undoubtedly been made more difficult by wider constraints such as the financial pressures facing the health and social care sector, shortages of emergency medical staffing, the effects of demographic changes, and an historical configuration of hospital services which is unsustainable.

Despite the challenges, the report found that the considerable focus on emergency care over recent years by the Department of Health is now securing some improvement. There are many local initiatives to prevent avoidable emergency admissions, including risk prediction by GPs, education with self-management, hospital alternatives and telemedicine. The Trusts have also made great efforts to improve their management of patient admissions and discharges resulting in shorter hospital stays and falling hospital bed numbers. New ways of treating patients more quickly and in different settings are being developed, such as rapid assessment triage models of care which can divert minor cases away from emergency departments.

While the report acknowledges the earnest efforts being made to improve the emergency care pathway across the entire health and social care sector – including GPs, the social services and acute hospitals, it points out that there is still room for improvement:

- Many patients are still being admitted to hospital unnecessarily when they could be treated more appropriately elsewhere in the system, thus freeing beds up for those waiting for elective (planned) inpatient care. In 2015-16, for example, the Department’s statistics show that 16 per cent of all emergency admissions may not have been necessary
- Too many patients admitted as emergencies still face unnecessary delays in their discharge from hospital due to problems in securing appropriate care packages in their homes or the community. The Department’s target in 2015-16 was that no

patient with complex needs should remain in hospital for more than seven days after clinicians and other health professionals had deemed the patient to be ready for discharge. However, in that year over 1,700 such patients continued to occupy a hospital bed.

Mr Donnelly concluded: ***“Many of the messages conveyed in my report are echoed in the recently published Bengoa Report which reaffirms the need to rebalance the system of care away from acute hospital settings towards community and primary care provision. Having set the strategic direction, therefore, it is crucial that the Department provides ongoing support to health and social care providers to ensure that more effective models of emergency care, along the lines described in my report, are implemented and that the pace of change is increased.”***

#### **Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 08 November 2016.
4. Currently, emergency admissions account for 28 per cent of all patients admitted to hospital here and cost over £460 million in 2015-16. The number has risen from 151,000 in 2008-09 to just over 166,000 in 2015-16, an increase of ten per cent, with the vast majority (83 per cent) coming through the 18 hospital emergency departments located across the region. The rise in emergency admissions is also dominated by patients who stay less than two days (short-stay) in hospital.
5. In January 2016, the Department appointed an expert panel, clinically led by Professor Rafael Bengoa, to lead an informed debate on the best configuration of local health and social care services. The panel's report - Systems, Not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care, was published on 25 October 2016.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Sean McKay (028 9025 1075).