

‘Working in the dark’: Patients wait almost a year for medical scans

Victorians are waiting almost a year for medical scans at public hospitals due to staff shortages and a lack of imaging equipment.

The situation is postponing the diagnosis of medical conditions, delaying treatment and causing unnecessary stress for patients and their families, according to health worker unions. Scans for cancer and other serious illnesses can take up to 11 months at some public hospitals, and health services have reported turning away patients who need results within weeks.

“Medical imaging is the cornerstone of diagnostics, and if you can’t get that done you are working in the dark,” said Andrew Hewat, the executive officer of the Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association, which represents thousands of health workers including radiographers and sonographers.

Hewat said some Victorians were enduring waits of almost a year for non-urgent specialty scans, such as breast MRIs at some public hospitals. These scans are sought out by people under 50 who have a high risk of developing breast cancer due to family history.

Hewat is also aware of delays of almost three months for non-contrast MRI scans at one health service, as well as a 12-week wait for routine ultrasounds for non-pregnancy-related conditions.

The union blames the delays on a national shortage of radiographers, radiologists and sonographers, as well as the federal health department not granting enough MRI licences. These licences are needed in order for scans performed by the equipment to be eligible for Medicare.

One health worker, who did not have authority to speak publicly, confirmed these waiting times and expressed frustration at the situation.

“We just don’t have enough scanners for the volume of work we get,” they said, adding that they sometimes had to turn patients away who needed semi-urgent scans in under three weeks.

“It’s frustrating because we want to fit everyone in. They think, ‘Why do I have to take my referral and pay a gap fee for a scan I should have been able to access at my local public hospital?’”

Many people choose to have a diagnostic scan at a private radiology clinic or private hospital and pay a gap fee, but the majority of scans are free in public hospitals. Bulk billing is often not a widely available option at private clinics.

While many patients are waiting in the community, in some cases, patients are occupying a hospital bed until scanning equipment becomes available.