

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Tackling Cancer with Radiotherapy

NSW Department of Health

June 2009

About the audit

Cancer will affect one in two men and one in three women currently living in NSW during their lifetime. By 2016, there will be an estimated 45,000 cases of cancer each year, costing around \$106 billion over the next ten years.


The focus of this audit is on radiotherapy services. Along with surgery and chemotherapy, radiotherapy is one of the main treatments for cancer. Radiotherapy can be used to cure cancer and also to reduce pain. In this audit we wanted to determine how well NSW Health manages the provision and delivery of radiotherapy services.

Audit opinion

Overall radiotherapy services are managed in a reasonably efficient and effective manner. Much is being done to further improve efficiency and effectiveness, and more can be done. The projected growth in demand for radiotherapy services will further challenge NSW Health and it needs to more clearly demonstrate how it will have the right facilities in the right place at the right time.

We found that, overall, radiotherapy services are provided in a reasonably efficient manner. Most patients have reasonable access to radiotherapy services. NSW has as many linear accelerators per 1000 cancer patients as other comparable jurisdictions. Centres are for the most part adequately staffed, well equipped and well utilised.

We were unable to obtain similar assurance in relation to the effectiveness of the provision of radiotherapy treatment. We looked for, but did not find, clarity and agreement on what the results for patients should be from the use of radiotherapy.



We found that the foundation for many improvements in efficiency and effectiveness appears to be in place. This includes improving:

- accessibility of radiotherapy services such as by more timely referrals, reducing waiting times, and locating radiotherapy facilities in regional centres
- operational performance of radiotherapy treatment centres by waiting list management, patient booking systems and staff rostering.

We expected that NSW Health would have a strategy or plan to help ensure that the provision and delivery of radiotherapy services are directed to areas of need and the highest priorities. We also expected its assessments to support value for money.

We found that NSW Health had undertaken significant planning in relation to the development of a draft *Radiotherapy Services Plan 2007-2011*, but not released it due to the need to resolve the significant funding required.

Although there has been no published plan, we found that implementation of state-wide planning has progressed. We also found assessments in the *Business Case for the Radiotherapy Services Plan 2007* to support value for money.



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Key findings

Are radiotherapy services provided efficiently and effectively?

We found that, overall, radiotherapy services are provided in a reasonably efficient manner. Most patients have reasonable access to radiotherapy services. Centres are for the most part adequately staffed, well equipped and well utilised.

We were unable to obtain similar assurance in relation to the effectiveness of the provision of radiotherapy treatment. We looked for, but did not find, clarity and agreement on what the results for patients should be from the use of radiotherapy.

Current radiotherapy treatment rates for NSW residents are around 35% and fall well short of NSW Health's 50% target. NSW Health needs to look closely at the changing evidence basis for this target, particularly considering that treatments have changed over time and radiotherapy is provided in combination with other treatments.

We found that, while the foundation for many improvements in efficiency and effectiveness appears to be in place, there is scope for further improvement.

Are radiotherapy services likely to be adequate in the future?

We found that NSW Health had undertaken significant planning in relation to the development of a draft *Radiotherapy Services Plan 2007-2011*, but not released it due to the need to resolve the significant funding required.

Although there has been no published plan, we found that implementation of state-wide planning has progressed. This has included consideration of the estimated number of new cancer cases, flow patterns and the impact of new and expanded services. This enables assessment of the impact of adjustments to flow patterns and the supply of radiotherapy services. This planning process has identified areas of geographic need including the Central Coast, Illawarra/Shoalhaven, Hunter/New England, and Sydney West/Sydney South West regions.

We also found assessments in the *Business Case for the Radiotherapy Services Plan 2007* to support value for money.

We believe that NSW Health should issue a 10 year strategic plan for radiotherapy services, noting that the progress of its implementation will be determined by resource and funding availability. In this chapter we also recommend more value for money assessment, and analysis of affordability and funding.

Summary of recommendations

We make a number of recommendations that seek to improve:

- efficiency and effectiveness of radiotherapy services
- assurance that radiotherapy services are likely to be adequate in the future.