

Dear

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION – SPINE DECOMPRESSION SURGERY

I write in response to your request for information in relation to spine decompression surgery.

Question:

- We would be interested in learning about these key elements of SCI care in Scotland for your respective HB:
  1. The average ‘injury to spine, decompression surgery interval’ (or be differentiated from general life saving surgery)
  2. The number of secondary referrals (%) necessary
  3. The average time from spinal cord injury and spinal cord decompression surgery (injury-decompression interval).
  4. The amount (%) of secondary referrals. This includes all transfers from the primary trauma centre (or initial hospital care) to another hospital. In Scotland this may be to another hospital where the decompressive surgery is performed, or admission to a specialized rehab centre.
  5. The amount (%) of tertiary referrals. Alongside, with definitions provided above/below, this would relate to patients e.g. treated in primary trauma centre, then referred to another hospital to do the decompression surgery and then to another one providing inpatient rehabilitation.

Hence, ‘secondary referrals’ describe the transfer of spinal cord injury (SCI) patients from an initial hospital—typically a trauma centre providing life-saving interventions—to a specialized centre where decompressive spine surgery is performed. These transfers occur after the initial emergency treatment and are considered a contributing factor to delays in surgery. This definition is consistent with current literature, which has demonstrated that secondary referrals can contribute to delays in decompressive surgery, potentially affecting neurological recovery and increasing the risk of complications.

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Chair Professor John Connaghan CBE  
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*Lothian NHS Board is the common name of Lothian Health Board*



'Tertiary referrals' would include a stay in two hospitals before being treated in a specialized rehabilitation centre for inpatient rehabilitation care.

Answer:

I am advised that the information you have requested is not held in a centrally extractable format and would require us to carry out a full audit.

Under the Freedom of Information Act NHS Lothian is not required to create new records to enable it to respond to your enquiry. This information is not collated or held in aggregate form and it would be necessary to review all case files relating to patients over the period you have requested to assemble the information you seek. Even if NHS Lothian did this – and there would be significant cost implications in doing so – it would be unable to respond in full to your request. The information requested is therefore exempt under section 12.1 – Cost.

I am sorry I cannot help with your request.

If you are unhappy with our response to your request, you do have the right to request us to review it. Your request should be made within 40 working days of receipt of this letter, and we will reply within 20 working days of receipt. If our decision is unchanged following a review and you remain dissatisfied with this, you then have the right to make a formal complaint to the Scottish Information Commissioner within 6 months of receipt of our review response. You can do this by using the Scottish Information Commissioner's Office online appeals service at [www.itspublicknowledge.info/Appeal](http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/Appeal). If you remain dissatisfied with the Commissioner's response you then have the option to appeal to the Court of Session on a point of law.

If you require a review of our decision to be carried out, please write to the FOI Reviewer at the email address at the head of this letter. The review will be undertaken by a Reviewer who was not involved in the original decision-making process.

FOI responses (subject to redaction of personal information) may appear on NHS Lothian's Freedom of Information website at: <https://org.nhsllothian.scot/FOI/Pages/default.aspx>

Yours sincerely

**ALISON MACDONALD**  
**Executive Director, Nursing**  
Cc: Chief Executive