

BRIEF RESEARCH REPORT

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The International Federation for Emergency Medicine report on emergency department crowding and access block: a brief summary

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Abstract

Objective: To develop comprehensive guidance that captures international impacts, causes, and solutions related to emergency department crowding and access block

Methods: Emergency physicians representing 15 countries from all IFEM regions composed the Task Force. Monthly meetings were held via video-conferencing software to achieve consensus for report content. The report was submitted and approved by the IFEM Board on June 1, 2020.

Results: A total of 14 topic dossiers, each relating to an aspect of ED crowding, were researched and completed collaboratively by members of the Task Force.

Conclusions: The IFEM report is a comprehensive document intended to be used in whole or by section to inform and address aspects of ED crowding and access block. Overall, ED crowding is a multifactorial issue requiring systems-wide solutions applied at local, regional, and national levels. Access block is the predominant contributor of ED crowding in most parts of the world.

Keywords: Crowding, Access block, Care systems, Emergency care systems, Emergency department management, Emergency department operations

Emergency department (ED) crowding and access block represent potentially the greatest threats to the core mission of emergency care across the world. The problem is pervasive, massive in scale, and amounts to a public health emergency with potentially lethal consequences [1]. At its core, crowding and access block overwhelm ED resources and prevent the delivery of timely and

effective care for patients. These are patients in need of necessary and immediate attention for the whole range of medical, trauma, and behavioral emergencies that can impact a person or community. The causes of ED crowding and access block are complex and multifactorial and can vary considerably not only between hospitals, jurisdictions, and countries, but also within the same setting during different periods of time [1, 2].

The International Federation of Emergency Medicine (IFEM) recognized that there was both an extreme need and a unique opportunity to provide EDs around the world with expert and evidence-based guidance. Recognizing crowding and access block were wicked problems

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(problems that are challenging to solve due to complexity, breadth, and/or contradictory elements) requiring adaptive solutions, the plan was to develop a resource that could be adapted to local circumstances. The ED Crowding and Access Block Task Force was constructed with this goal and endorsed by the IFEM Board and launched at the International Conference on Emergency Medicine conference in South Korea in 2019. Since that time, the ED Crowding and Access Block Task Force Terms of Reference were approved, and the task force has seen involvement from all IFEM regions. Over thirty emergency medicine (EM) physician experts and thought leaders, with a broad range of expertise, have been joining monthly video conferences and contributing to fourteen distinct dossiers and well-referenced synopses which constitute the basis for this report (Table 1).

This report examines the complexity of ED crowding and access block through multiple important lenses. These range from an accounting of the impacts of the problem through to tactical and strategic solutions including policy, advocacy, operational, and “on-the-floor” initiatives. One overwhelmingly common theme that emerged through task force deliberations is that the problem may be misnamed. ED crowding and access block is not an issue isolated to the emergency department, but fundamentally a health-systems issue [1, 3]. Emergency departments are well-prepared to serve as the “safety net” for a wide range of medical, traumatic, and behavioral emergencies; however, EDs cannot fulfill this mission if they are also forced to become the “safety

valve” for dysfunction and limited capacity within the community and the hospital. Despite this, the task force would also share the view that EDs that are not contributing to solutions for healthcare system dysfunction are also part of the problem, hence the vital importance of emergency care providers who are well-versed in system issues to infiltrate decision-making and public awareness realms at multiple levels.

As a “wicked problem” for health care systems internationally, experts and thought leaders around the world have invested a remarkable amount of resources to understand the problem and formulate solutions. This report is designed to leverage that vast international experience and serve as a comprehensive global resource for EDs facing the challenge of crowding and access block. This document is meant to be used as a toolbox with each section acting as one tool of many to diagnose and treat an unsafe and overwhelmed ED. Leaders in emergency care will be able to use these instruments to address their local circumstances both on a short-term and long-term basis. This report is also meant to be shared in portion, or in its entirety, with all of the stakeholders that can be impacted by ED crowding and access block as well as the partners necessary to mitigate and distribute risk and allow emergency care to fulfill its core mission.

The report, including the full list of authors, can be found in its entirety on the IFEM website [4].

Table 1 Overview of breadth of dossier topics found in the IFEM ED Crowding and Access Block Task Force report

Dossier topic
Background
Evidence base for effects of crowding
Financial and human costs of crowding
Metrics
International experience
Case studies and patient voices
Patient flow
Emergency medical services (prehospital services) offload
Input and demand management
Throughput
Output and boarding
Management
Leadership
Legal risks and regulatory violations
Policy
Advocacy
Early lessons from COVID-19 and disaster medicine

Acknowledgements

Collaborators are outlined below:
International Federation Emergency Department Crowding and Access Block Task Force:
Arshia Javidan; Kim Hansen; Ian Higginson; Peter Jones; David Petrie; John Bonning; Simon Judkins; Eric Revue; David Lewis; Brian Holroyd; Laurie Mazurik; Colin Graham; Alix Carter; Shirley Lee; Eliecer Cohen-Olivella; Paul Ho; Ramesh Maharjan; Bianca Bertuzzi; Haldun Akoglu; Jim Ducharme; Maaret Castren; Adrian Boyle; Howard Ovens; Cheng-Chung Fang; Joseph Kalanzi; Jeremiah Schuur; Venkatesh Thiruganasambandamoorthy; Taj Hassan; Gautam Bodiwala; Pauline Convocar; Katherine Henderson; Eddy Lang

Authors’ contributions

All authors of this manuscript have contributed substantially to this manuscript’s inception, analysis, and drafting, and fulfill the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors’ criteria for authorship. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

We have no financial relationships to disclose with regards to this manuscript. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Availability of data and materials

There is no dataset for this study. The full IFEM ED Crowding and Access Block Report is available on the IFEM website and referenced in the paper.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Competing interests

The IFEM ED crowding and access block report is referenced in the paper and is available on the IFEM website in its entirety. This article is being simultaneously published in the *International Journal of Emergency Medicine* (doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12245-020-00312-x>), *Canadian Journal of Emergency medicine* (doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43678-020-00065-9>), *Emergency Medicine Journal* (doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/emmermed-2020-210716>), and *Emergency Medicine Australasia* (doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1742-6723.13660>)

Otherwise, the authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Received: 16 October 2020 Accepted: 26 October 2020

Published online: 14 January 2021

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