

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Waiting for Heart Surgery: What is the Impact on Nova Scotians?

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Previous studies have explored the impact of waiting for coronary bypass surgery on patients. However, until now little attention has been paid to the effect of these wait times on the well-being and anxiety levels of those waiting for surgery. Two Nova Scotia researchers have studied this issue – and their results may surprise you.

Heart failure remains the number one cause of death in Canada. In Nova Scotia, cardiovascular disease (heart disease, stroke and atherosclerosis) causes the death of 2,800 people each year, or 36% of all deaths in the province. Wait times to undergo life-saving procedures are an issue for health-care professionals and patients alike.

Two researchers from Dalhousie University have explored how waiting for coronary bypass surgery affects the well-being of individuals. Patients placed on waiting lists were approached and divided into groups based on the perceived urgency of their cases. People who waited past the standard wait time for their particular level of urgency were considered to have a prolonged wait time as compared to others considered to have a normal wait time.

Jafna Cox, Director of Research, Division of Cardiology, and Gregory Hirsch, Head, Division of Cardiac Surgery, both at Dalhousie University, found that while those on waiting lists for bypass surgery reported a lower quality of life than the Canadian average, those patients who waited longer based on their level of urgency actually reported a higher quality of life and reduced anxiety about the surgery and its outcomes.

Six months after surgery, all patients experienced similar improvements to their quality of life. “The largest factor determining patient quality of life and anxiety was income,” says Dr. Cox. “The income levels of respondents consistently emerged as positively affecting responses regarding quality of life, and negatively regarding levels of anxiety.”

“In the future,” notes Dr. Hirsch, “this information may be used to help improve the process of developing wait lists for surgery. It’s important we improve the management of patients on the wait list to maximize quality of life and minimize anxiety for these Nova Scotians.”

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