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The length of time it takes patients to receive hospital treatment after referral has dropped to its worst ever rate.

ISD Scotland figures released today have shown just 81.4 per cent of patients hit the 18-week referral-to-treatment target in September.

And in some health boards, a third of people didn't receive that vital care in the agreed timeframe.

That's well below the 90 per cent standard imposed by the SNP government.

Medics have repeatedly stressed the importance of people beginning treatment as soon as possible after they are referred by a GP or a nurse.

But performance on that measure has plummeted, and compares to 92 per cent just four years ago.

The official statistics also revealed more than 30 per cent of outpatients waiting for an appointment had to wait longer than 12 weeks, another worst-ever performance.

Shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said the performance was more evidence of the SNP's "shambolic" stewardship of the NHS.

It comes as nurse and consultant vacancies are also at a record high, while BMA Scotland reports one in five junior doctors are regularly sleep deprived at work.

**Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:**

"With every week that passes, another set of statistics exposes the SNP's shambolic running of our NHS.

"And while it may look bad on paper, it's even worse for the patients and over-stretched medical staff who have to face the reality.

"It's well known that the sooner someone starts treatment after being referred, the better their chances of recovery.

“Yet under this SNP government the referral-to-treatment waiting times have plummeted to their worst ever.

“The SNP can’t possibly claim to be a party of the NHS while these appalling statistics continue.”