

UNISON: Why we love the NHS

The UK's National Health Service provides a comprehensive range of services that is free at the point of need and accessible to all. It is a human service providing peace of mind to millions, regardless of their income, in which people care for other people and different parts of the service work together in partnership.

The NHS has come in for criticism from right-wing critics of President Obama's health plans. Some of the claims, such as those that patients over a certain age cannot receive treatment for brain tumours or heart bypasses, are simply untrue – there are no such bans and nor have there ever been.

Various rogue British commentators, such as Karol Sikora and Daniel Hannan, are also trying to portray the NHS as unpopular and unresponsive. However, as the facts and figures below demonstrate, nothing could be further from the truth...

What are the waiting times for treatment on the NHS?

- From January 2009, no one in England waits more than 18 weeks from the time they are referred to the start of their treatment.¹ And, most importantly, the average wait for treatment is much shorter, at just 8 weeks.
- For cancer patients, 99.7% of patients are seen within 2 weeks from urgent GP referral to outpatient appointment. For breast cancer, 99.8 % of patients are treated within 1 month from diagnosis to treatment.²
- Virtually all patients are treated within four hours at Accident & Emergency units in hospitals.³

What do patients think of their NHS?

- The NHS remains a defining feature of life in the UK, consistently rated as more popular than the Royal Family or Parliament.
- The NHS regulator's latest patient survey recorded 92% of patients saying their care was "good", "very good" or "excellent".⁴
- According to the 2009 British Social Attitudes report, satisfaction with the NHS is at its highest level for 25 years. And those with personal experience of the NHS rate it highest of all.⁵

How does the UK system compare to others?

- In comparison with the healthcare systems of five other comparable countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the USA) the NHS was found to be the most impressive overall by the New York-based Commonwealth Fund in 2007 (the USA came last). Specifically the NHS was rated as the best system in terms of quality of care, co-ordination of care, and equity, but also, crucially, in terms of the efficiency of care.⁶
- The last time the World Health Organization produced a ranking of the world's health systems, the UK was ranked considerably higher than the USA, which was listed below Morocco and Costa Rica.⁷
- Estimates of life expectancy at birth by both the UN⁸ and the CIA⁹ place the UK above the USA.

What is NICE?

- Far from being a “death panel”, the National Institute for healthcare and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is a world-renowned body that evaluates the effectiveness of drugs for use in the UK health system.
- Its evaluation process involves top medical experts working alongside members of the public.
- Many other health systems in the world are now looking to duplicate its approach to drug evaluation.
- NICE rejects only a tiny percentage of all the drugs it assesses for use on the NHS (around 5 per cent) and since 1999 has recommended over 90 per cent of the cancer drugs it has been asked to look at.¹⁰

Is the NHS an efficient system?

- OECD figures show that UK total health expenditure as a percentage of GDP (8.4%) is below the OECD average and a long way below the USA, which has easily the most expensive system at 15.3%.¹¹
- The UK NHS is largely free of the huge transaction costs and perverse incentives that blight other systems, such as the USA.¹²
- The NHS has not been complacent or uncritically carried on as normal; a major review at the start of this decade evaluated different healthcare funding options and concluded that the current method of NHS funding through general taxation was both the fairest and most efficient one.¹³
- In recent years productivity in the NHS has been rising alongside extra funding, for example by 0.7 per cent in 2006 and by 1.2 per cent in 2007.¹⁴

¹ Department of Health, <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/Perfomancedataandstatistics/18WeeksReferraltoTreatmentstatistics/index.htm>

² Department of Health, http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsStatistics/DH_091122

³ Department of Health, http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/Perfomancedataandstatistics/AccidentandEmergency/DH_079085

⁴ Adult Inpatient Survey Results 2007, published 2008 http://www.nhssurveys.org/Filestore/documents/Key_Findings_report_for_the_2007_Inpatients_Survey.pdf

⁵ “The NHS: satisfied now?” by John Appleby and Miranda Phillips, in *British Social Attitudes: the 25th Report*, <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/bsa/docs/BSA-25-Report.pdf>

⁶ The Commonwealth Fund, 2007, *Mirror Mirror on the Wall: An International Update on the Comparative Performance of American Health Care* <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Content/Publications/Fund-Reports/2007/May/Mirror--Mirror-on-the-Wall--An-International-Update-on-the-Comparative-Performance-of-American-Health.aspx>

⁷ <http://www.photius.com/rankings/healthranks.html>

⁸ CIA, The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2102.html>

⁹ UN, World Population Prospects, http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/WPP2006_Highlights_rev.pdf

¹⁰ *Health Service Journal* online, “NICE chairman hits back at critics”, Sir Michael Rawlins, 18 August 2008

¹¹ OECD Factbook 2009, <http://lysander.sourceoecd.org/vl=1664824/cl=11/nw=1/rpsv/factbook2009/10/02/01/index.htm>

¹² See for example, *British Medical Journal*, 2007, “Competition in a publicly funded healthcare system”, Steffie Woolhandler and David U Himmelstein, <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/335/7630/1126#REF1>

¹³ *Securing our future health: taking a long-term view*, Derek Wanless, 2002, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/consult_wanless_index.htm

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics, June 2009, *Total public service output and productivity*, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/TotalPublicServiceFinalv5.pdf>