



The NHS:
The Envy of
the World?

Elliot Bidgood

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55 Tufton Street

London SW1P 3QL

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email: info@civitas.org.uk

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Introduction

In March 2013 Civitas commissioned research with ICM about public attitudes towards the NHS, in order to get a sense of where public opinion on the state of the service stands following the publication of the inquiry into the failings at Mid Staffordshire and the release of fresh international data showing the UK trailing other developed nations in key indicators of healthcare quality. The results of the poll were surprising in some regards. PDF available [here](#). There were three main takeaways:

1. An overwhelming 83% felt that provided that care is accessible regardless of ability to pay, it did not matter whether health services were delivered by public, for-profit or non-profit providers, suggesting that public are not in fact committed to the public monopoly structure of the NHS
2. Despite comfort with the idea of private provision, 56% of people agree when presented with the statement that the NHS is “the envy of the world”
3. More people than not (41% to 36%) feel that France and Germany, which guarantee care using mixed universal social insurance systems, have as good a level of healthcare as the UK and reject the suggestion that their citizens “don’t receive as good a level of healthcare as we do on the NHS”

Backgrounds

There has been a heightened focus on the issue of care quality and overall standards in the NHS in recent months, due in part to the publication of the Francis Report into the Mid Staffordshire hospital scandal in early February. At Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust, 400 to 1,200 unnecessary deaths occurred in a period of a few short years. Anecdotal evidence about care was also extremely damning. Staff numbers were inadequate and those that were present were not always trained to use equipment or were sometimes too junior to handle assigned duties. Drugs were misadministered and patients were left dehydrated, in soiled sheets or in pain due to failures to provide painkillers. At times, families of mistreated patients had to take up the slack to ensure basic care, but both they and objectors among staff at the trust appeared powerless to affect change. Robert Francis QC, who led the inquiry, identified “an insidious negative culture involving a tolerance of poor standards” and a misplaced focus on “doing the system’s business – not that of the patients”.ⁱ

Public debate about this issue has also been increased by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt's recent focus on standards and accountability in careⁱⁱ and by numerous other stories relating to standards in both the NHS and the social care sector. Despite these problems, the NHS is often celebrated as "the envy of the world" – in 1998 then Health Secretary Frank Dobson said Labour's health plans were intended to make this the caseⁱⁱⁱ and Liberal Democrat Baroness Jenny Tonge repeated the claim in 2011.^{iv} There is also an on-going public debate about the role of private providers in the NHS sparked by the competition aspects of the current government health reforms, which have been heavily attacked by the British Medical Association (BMA), employee unions and some politicians. This opposition recently led to a decision by the government to drop the planned Section 75 regulations, which would have expanded competition to more of the NHS.^v

Annual data released in 2012 by OECD Health^{vi} and a study released more recently on March 5th by The Lancet^{vii} demonstrated that it is also the case that most other universal care nations outperform the NHS on death rates, preventable mortality, years of life lost, life expectancy, waiting times, access to doctors and nurses, technological uptake and many other measures of healthcare quality. France and Germany were among those that outperformed the UK. Further, according to the Euro Health Consumer Index 2012, Britain is currently twelfth in consumer satisfaction among European nations, with Austria, Finland, Norway, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Luxembourg, Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands ahead. Areas in which the NHS needed to improve included; access to personal medical records, portability, waiting times (especially for specialists and CT scans), heart infarction deaths, infant deaths, cancer deaths, preventable years of life lost, MRSA infections, access to caesarean sections, depression treatment, access to cataract operations, access to infant 4-disease vaccinations, long-term care for the elderly, access to at-home dialysis, novel cancer drug deployment and access to drugs for Alzheimer's and schizophrenia.^{viii}

For these reasons, we sought to investigate whether people feel that the NHS is the "envy of the world", how they feel about private providers operating within the health system, how they perceive European healthcare relative to ours and which aspects of hospital care concern them.

Methodology & Results

The poll run by ICM was conducted over the weekend of the 8th-10th of March. It involved a nationally representative sample of 1,002 adults in Great Britain. For comparability, we chose to exactly replicate four questions that had been asked by ICM on previous occasions.

We asked “Here are some things people have said about the NHS. For each one I read out please say whether you agree or disagree. There are no right or wrong answers, it’s your own opinions we want. People living in European countries such as France and Germany don’t receive as good a level of healthcare as we do on the NHS” (Answer Options: “Agree Strongly”, “Agree somewhat”, “Disagree somewhat”, “Disagree strongly”, “Don’t know”). This was asked in March 2006 by ICM,^{ix} results from then and from when we asked were as follows:

	2006	2013
Unweighted Base	1012	1002
Weighted Base	1012	1002
NET: Agree	362 36%	359 36%
Agree Strongly	159 16%	148 15%
Agree somewhat	204 20%	210 21%
Disagree somewhat	264 26%	247 25%
Disagree Strongly	230 23%	161 16%
NET: Disagree	493 49%	408 41%
Don't Know	156 15%	235 23%

Figure 1: Comparison of 2006 and 2013 on attitudes to French and German care

This shows that although a significant proportion of the public are unsure as to how good French and German healthcare is relative to ours, most (by a margin of 41% to 36%) feel their care is good and there has been no increase in the number feeling NHS care is better.

Second, we asked “Here are some things people have said about the NHS. For each one I read out please say whether you agree or disagree. There are no right or wrong answers, it's your own opinions we want. It shouldn't matter whether hospitals or surgeries are run by the government, not-for-profit organisations or the private sector, provided that everyone including the least well off has access to care” (Answer Options: “Agree Strongly”, “Agree somewhat”, “Disagree somewhat”, “Disagree strongly”, “Don't know”). This was asked in March 2006 by ICM,^x results from then and from when we asked were as follows:

	2006	2013
Unweighted Base	1012	1002
Weighted Base	1012	1002
NET: Agree	838 83%	827 83%
Agree Strongly	559 55%	564 56%
Agree somewhat	279 28%	263 26%
Disagree somewhat	78 8%	44 4%
Disagree Strongly	62 6%	98 10%
NET: Disagree	139 14%	142 14%
Don't Know	34 3%	33 3%

Figure 2: Comparison of 2006 and 2013 on attitudes to private involvement in healthcare

This result is particularly striking, as despite commonly assumed public support for the NHS as currently constituted, there is in fact very strong and consistent support for diversity in provision and little dedication to an absolute public monopoly, provided that the principle of access regardless of ability to pay is upheld. Further, more than half (56%) agreed strongly, while only 10% disagreed strongly.

Third, we asked “Some public figures claim that the NHS is the envy of the world. Do you agree or disagree?” (Answer Options: “Agree”, “Disagree”, “Don’t Know”). This was asked in June 2008 by ICM,^{xi} results from then and from when we asked were as follows:

	2008	2013
Unweighted Base	1040	1002
Weighted Base	1040	1002
Agree	532 51%	564 56%
Disagree	475 46%	379 38%
Don't Know	33 3%	59 6%

Figure 3: Comparison of 2008 and 2013 on whether the NHS is “the envy of the world”

This result is again interesting in light of recent events and some of the other answers given by the public. Public feeling that the NHS is “the envy of the world” does not seem to have been visibly affected by Mid Staffordshire – indeed, the public profess slightly more pride in the service than in 2008. However, we also know that compared to 2006, they are just as supportive of the use of

private providers and no more likely to feel that French and German healthcare is worse than our own.

Finally, we asked “Which of the following would concern you the most if you were told you needed to go to hospital for in-patient treatment?” (Answer Options: “That you might pick up an infection in the hospital”, “That you'd have to wait a long time for treatment”, “That you might have to share accommodation or bathroom facilities with the opposite sex”, “That there wouldn't be enough staff to pay attention to your needs”, “That the treatment you received might be of poor quality”, “None of these”). This was asked in June 2008 by ICM,^{xii} results from then and from when we asked were as follows:

	2008	2013
Unweighted Base	1040	1002
Weighted Base	1040	1002
That you might pick up an infection in the hospital	415 40%	242 24%
That you'd have to wait a long time for treatment	263 25%	265 26%
That the treatment you received might be of poor quality	82 8%	185 18%
That there wouldn't be enough staff to pay attention to your needs	104 10%	164 16%
That you might have to share accommodation or bathroom facilities with the opposite sex	107 10%	70 7%
None of these	69 7%	76 8%

Figure 4: Comparison of 2008 and 2013 on aspects of hospital care that are of concern to people

Although this question is relative and so we perhaps do not know exactly how much importance people attach to their stated concerns, it would appear that while hospital-acquired infections have receded as a concern, waiting times remain a concern and more people are worried about poor treatment and the effect of understaffing.

Conclusions

This data first of all tells us that despite the negative rhetoric in the last three years about the increasing role of private providers within the NHS, the public remain strongly supportive of the use of private provision, so long as access to all is guaranteed. The recent government U-turn on the Section 75 competition regulations is particularly interesting in light of this. Moreover, we also know that most think that the French and German healthcare systems, which guarantee care using a mix of public and private providers, are as good as the NHS, with no increase in the number feeling that British healthcare is superior.

In light of these results, the fact that 56% of the public also feel that the NHS is “the envy of the world” can best be interpreted to mean that the principle that care is ultimately accessible to all regardless of ability to pay is what the public prize about the service, rather than the fact that it is a public monopoly in terms of its delivery arrangements. From there, we can take heart from the evidence that other nations have already structured their systems around this nuanced distinction and have managed to deliver better care for their citizens as a result.

Therefore, these findings present a golden opportunity for politicians to stiffen their spines about the need for continued reform and challenge the perceived taboo against criticising monopoly provision, as not only are competition reforms necessary and empirically backed, it seems that more public support exists for them than often meets the eye.

Notes

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