

England and Wales “achieve more with less” on cancer outcomes than other countries

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Researchers say a new study challenges government assertions that the NHS has a poor record internationally in treating cancer. The study found the NHS was “comparatively effective and efficient” achieving sustained improvement in cancer outcomes over a 27 year period that rivalled other major developed countries.

The research was published in the *British Journal of Cancer* (doi:10.1038/bjc.2011.393). It compared cancer mortality with the amount spent on health as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) in England and Wales with nine other developed countries from 1979 to 2006.

The authors conclude the NHS “achieved more with proportionately less than other major developed countries.”

Ministers have criticised the UK’s record on cancer, citing poorer survival and death rates compared with Europe among their reasons for a radical overhaul of the NHS.

Colin Pritchard, professor of psychiatric social work at Bournemouth University, who co-wrote the research, told the *BMJ*, “Our cancer study is a boost for patients and their families and for frontline NHS staff and a blow to the government’s rationale for the changes to the NHS.”

Professor Pritchard carried out the study with Tamas Hickish, consultant medical oncologist at Poole and Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch hospitals.

The study compared England and Wales with Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States.

It contrasted each country’s economic input (GDP health expenditure) with clinical outputs (cancer mortality rates for people aged 15 to 74), to compare their efficiency and effectiveness in reducing deaths from cancer.

Male cancer deaths fell substantially (more than 20%) in six countries over the period, according to the research.

At the outset, in 1979-81, the male average cancer mortality rate in England and Wales was third highest among the 10 countries, but by 2004-6 it was sixth highest.

The fall—a 31% reduction from 4156 deaths per million in 1979-81 to 2869 per million in 2004-6—was “significantly

greater than seven other countries,” says the study. In men aged 55-64 in England and Wales, the reduction in mortality was 35%.

Mortality among women fell by 19% in England and Wales, from 2716 per million in 1979-81 to 2202 per million in 2004-6. Only two other countries, Germany (20%), and Japan (23%) achieved better reductions, according to the study.

Spending on health as a proportion of GDP grew substantially in all countries over the period.

England and Wales spent less on health (reaching 7.5% of GDP in 2006) than all the other countries, apart from Spain, but had the highest annual fall in cancer mortality among men and women between 1979 and 2006, of 900 deaths per million.

The study compared average GDP spending on health to give each country a ratio for the number of lives “saved” each year per 1% of GDP spent.

In England and Wales there were 119 fewer deaths for 1% of GDP, better than all the other countries, with the next biggest ratios in the Netherlands (1:74) and Germany (1:68).

Professor Pritchard said, “Pound for pound, the NHS gets better clinical results than many other countries.”

A Department of Health spokesperson said, “While it is good that NHS cancer treatment is relatively efficient, we know that the results patients actually get lag behind many other countries. Our cancer strategy is clear—we aim to save 5000 extra lives every year by 2015 which will bring us up to the level achieved in many other comparable countries.”

The researchers say the government should be mindful, in planning reform, of the elements of the system that underlie the improvements to date.

They say their analysis adds to other evidence indicating that improvements “embedded within the health system will, if not disrupted, soon translate into improved survival.”

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