



Australian Adults' Health Care System Views and Experiences, 2001

Findings from the Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey

The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey indicates that Australians are more satisfied with their health care system than they were three years ago. Findings from the survey—which also interviewed adults in Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—show a significant decline over a three-year period in the percentage of Australians calling for a complete rebuilding of their health care system, from around 30 percent in 1998 to less than 20 percent in 2001. Likewise, one-quarter of Australian respondents believed that only minor changes were needed.

Australia compared favorably with other countries when it came to access to specialist services and the quality of physician services provided. There was also an increase in the percentage of Australians who rated their overall medical care as excellent or very good, from 54 percent in 1998 to 63 percent in 2001.

Nevertheless, one of five Australian adults stated that his or her own access to medical care when needed is worse than it was two years ago. Many respondents reported difficulties in getting needed care on nights or weekends and that waiting times and financial barriers made it difficult for them to see a specialist. The survey also found that during the past year, one of five Australians had not filled a prescription and one-third had not seen a dentist because of costs. With respect to Australians' ratings of health care quality, unlike the U.S., there were no significant differences evident between adults with below-average income and those with above-average income.

This data brief based on The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey focuses on the health system views and experiences of Australian adults. Comparative findings from the five-nation survey were reported in the May/June issue of *Health Affairs*.¹ The

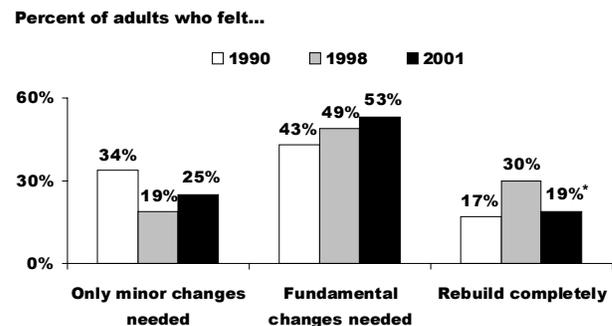
¹ Robert Blendon, Cathy Schoen, Catherine DesRoches, Robin Osborn, Kimberly Scoles, and Kinga Zapert, "Inequities in Health Care: A Five-Country Survey," *Health Affairs* 21 (May/June 2002): 182–91.

data brief includes additional analysis of the survey that does not appear in the *Health Affairs* article.

Satisfaction with the Health Care System

- Only 19 percent of Australians said the health care system needed to be completely rebuilt, compared with 30 percent just three years ago. Nevertheless, the majority of Australians (72%) continue to believe that their health system needs major reforms (Figure 1).

Australia Figure 1
Australia: Satisfaction with the Health Care System, 1990, 1998, and 2001



* Significantly different from 1998 at $p \leq .05$

Source: Harvard 1990 and The Commonwealth Fund 1998 and 2001 International Health Policy Surveys

- Nearly one of five Australians (19%) said their ability to get needed care has gotten worse over the past two years, while only 8 percent said it has gotten better (Figure 2).

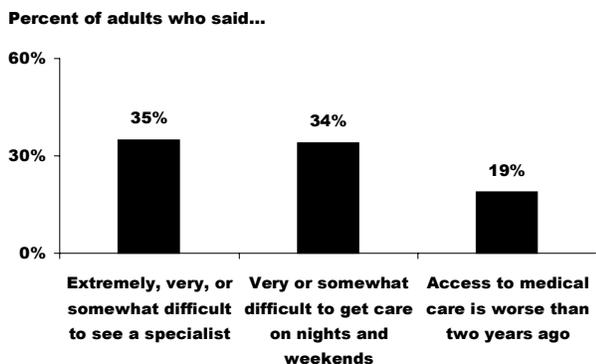
Health Care Access and Cost

- Obtaining medical care on nights and weekends is among Australians' top access concerns. One of three (34%) respondents reported that this was very or somewhat difficult (Figure 2).
- Thirty-five percent reported that it was very or extremely difficult (12%), or somewhat difficult (23%), to see a specialist. Nearly one-third (31%) of these

respondents cited financial barriers or lack of private insurance as a reason (Figures 2 and 5).

Australia Figure 2

Australia: Problems with Access to Care

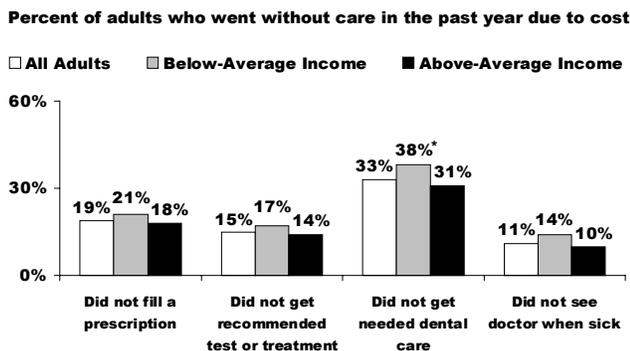


Source: The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey

- Australians face problems accessing health care services that are less well covered by national health insurance. One of five Australians (19%) reported not filling a prescription in the past year because of the cost, and one of three (33%) did not see a dentist for the same reason. Australians with below-average income experienced a slightly higher rate of problems than those with above-average income; however, these differences were significantly different for dental care only (Figure 3).

Australia Figure 3

Australia: Access Problems Due to Cost, by Income



* Significantly different from above-average income at $p \leq .05$
 Source: The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey

- Cost was cited by one of six Australians (15%) as the reason why he or she did not get recommended tests, treatment, or follow-up care (Figure 3).

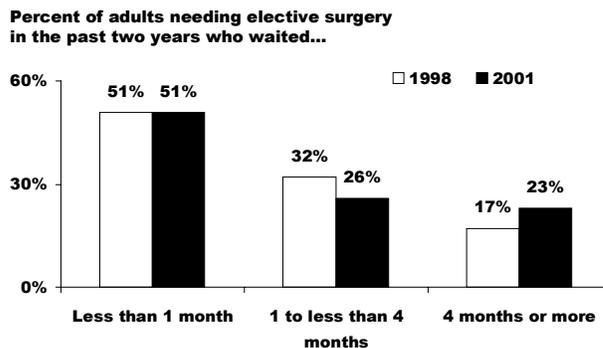
- Paying medical bills is especially a problem for Australians with below-average income: 17 percent of low-income adults reported a problem paying medical bills, compared with 8 percent of adults with above-average income.
- Seventy-nine percent of Australians said they believe that people with low incomes often or sometimes had more problems getting needed medical care than people with higher incomes. Eighty-three percent of respondents said that Australians with private insurance got better care than those who relied solely on the public insurance system.

Waiting Times

- Among adults who had elective (nonemergency) surgery in the past two years, half (51%) were admitted to a hospital for care within one month of their referral. This rate was second only to the United States. Still, 23 percent of Australians who had elective surgery reported waiting four months or more, up from 17 percent in 1998 (Figure 4).

Australia Figure 4

Australia: Waiting Times for Elective Surgery
 Base: Adults with elective surgery in the past two years



Source: The Commonwealth Fund 1998 and 2001 International Health Policy Surveys

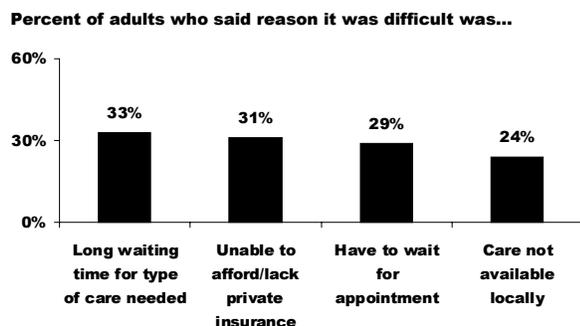
- Nearly half of Australians (47%) said they are very or somewhat worried that they will wait too long to get nonemergency medical care.
- For the one-third of Australians who reported that it is extremely, very, or somewhat difficult to see a specialist, the most common barriers mentioned were: waiting times for the type of care needed; inability to afford care and lack of private insurance;

and having to wait for an appointment or consultation (Figure 5).

Australia Figure 6

Australia Figure 5 Australia: Most Often Cited Barriers to Specialty Care

Base: Adults who reported it was extremely, very, or somewhat difficult to see a specialist



Source: The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey

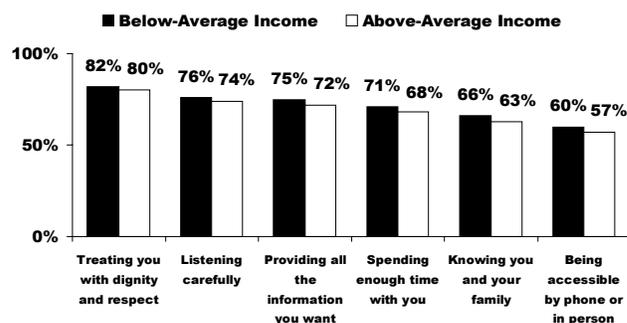
Quality-of-Care Ratings

- Two-thirds (63%) of Australians rated the overall care they received in the last year as excellent or very good, up from 54 percent in 1998. Only 10 percent rated their care as fair or poor.
- Among the five nations, Australian physician ratings either tied for first or were the second-highest. Two of three Australians rated their physician as excellent or very good on six different measures of responsiveness: treating the patient with dignity and respect, listening carefully, being accessible by phone or in person, spending enough time, knowing the patient, and providing the patient with all the information he or she wants.
- Adults with below- and above-average income rated their doctors similarly on all six of measures of quality and patient-centered care (Figure 6).
- In a survey of doctors conducted in 2000 in the same five countries, most Australian doctors agreed that not having enough time with patients was not a major problem.²

² Robert Blendon, Cathy Schoen, Karen Donelan, Robin Osborn, Catherine DesRoches, Kimberly Scoles, Karen Davis, Katherine Binns, and Kinga Zapert, "Physicians' Views on Quality of Care: A Five-Country Comparison," *Health Affairs* 20 (May/June 2001): 233-43.

Australia: Physician Ratings, by Income

Percent of adults rating their doctor as excellent or very good on...



Source: The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey

Summary

Australians' responses to the survey indicate that costs can pose a barrier to access to prescription medications, specialists, and dental care. Difficulty getting care on nights and weekends was also a leading health care access concern.

The Commonwealth Fund 2001 International Health Policy Survey consisted of telephone interviews with 1,400 adults in each of five countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Conducted in April and May of 2001 by Harris Interactive, the survey explored adults' views of their health care system and recent care experiences; to permit analysis of trends over time, the survey also included questions asked in earlier surveys. To compare experiences between lower- and higher-income adults, the survey participants were quoted the national median household income in 2001 and asked whether their own income was much or somewhat below this amount, about average, or much or somewhat above the national median. In Australia, 36 percent of adults described their income as below average; 18 percent as average; and 39 percent as above average. Seven percent did not answer the income question. Adults with average income were included in the country totals but not shown separately when comparing those with below-average and above-average income.

This data brief was prepared by Cathy Schoen, Robin Osborn, Robert Blendon, Catherine DesRoches, David Drucker, and Deirdre Downey.