



The Australian Health Care System: Views and Experiences of Adults with Health Problems

Findings from the Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey

The Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey finds that Australians with health problems are at risk for medical errors and care coordination problems. One of four Australian adults with health problems believed a medical mistake or medication error had been made in their care in the past two years. Over half of those reporting an error said it had caused serious health problems. Error rates were also high in the four other countries included in the survey: Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Experiences of Australian adults with health problems indicate concerns with care coordination. One of four received conflicting information from different doctors and one of eight was sent for duplicate tests. Rates of medical error and care coordination concerns were higher among those seeing multiple health professionals.

Half of Australians reported that their physician does not ask their views about treatment or care, and one of five left their doctor's office without having their questions answered. Yet, the majority of Australians rate their doctors highly.

Within the five-nation survey, Australian rates of errors, care coordination, and communication failures often ranked in the middle, neither the worst nor the best.

Australian adults with health problems cite waiting times and shortages of specialists and hospitals as their leading concerns for the health system. Costs were also a concern: one of four Australians had not filled a prescription and 44 percent had gone without needed dental care in the past two years due to costs.

The Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey consisted of interviews with a sample of adults with health problems in the five countries. Adults

with health problems included: those rating their health as fair or poor, those with a recent hospitalization or major surgery, or those with a serious illness or injury that required intensive medical care in the previous two years. These adults are among the most intensive users of the health care system and are particularly vulnerable to variations in quality of care and to cost and access barriers. Comparative findings from the five-nation survey were reported in the May/June 2003 issue of *Health Affairs*.¹

Patient Safety: Medical/Medication Errors

The Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care has undertaken a national effort to improve patient safety. Survey findings support the need for these efforts.

- Nearly a quarter (23%) of Australians with health problems reported experiencing a medication error or medical mistake in the past two years (Figure 1).

Australia Figure 1
Medication and Medical Errors

Percent in the past two years:	AUS	CAN	NZ	UK	US
Given the wrong medication or wrong dose by a doctor, hospital, or pharmacist	11	11	13	10	12
Believed a medical mistake was made in your treatment or care	19	20	18	13	23
Either error: medication error or medical mistake	23	25	23	18	28

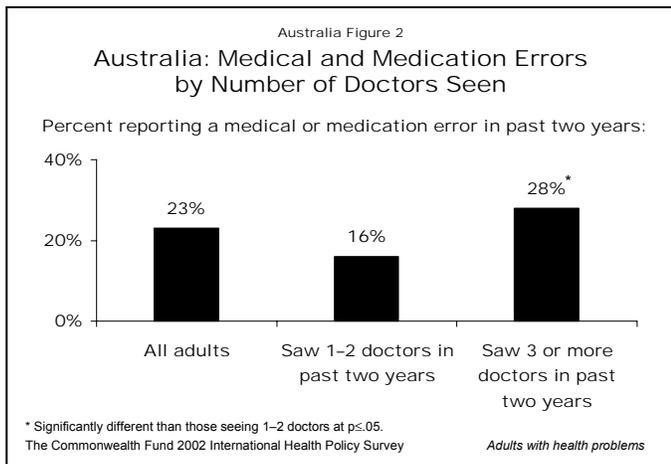
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- Among those reporting an error, the majority (55%) said this error had caused a serious health problem. Including all adults in the survey, 13 percent—one of

¹ R. J. Blendon, C. Schoen, C. DesRoches, R. Osborn, and K. Zapert, "Common Concerns Amid Diverse Systems: Health Care Experiences in Five Countries," *Health Affairs* 22 (May/June 2003): 106–21.

eight—reported an error had caused serious health problems in the past two years.

- Rates of medical errors were higher among those who had seen multiple doctors during the previous two years. Twenty-eight percent of those with three or more doctors experienced an error, compared with 16 percent of those with one to two doctors (Figure 2).

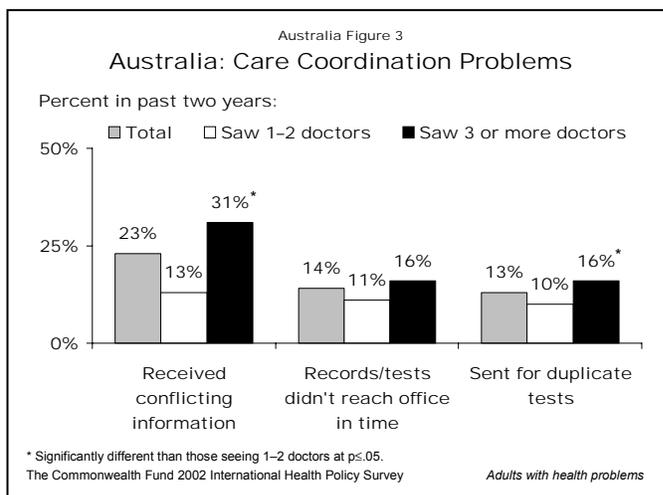


- Rates of medication errors were higher than average among those taking multiple medications: 15 percent of Australians taking four or more medications reported a medication error.
- Australian rates of medical errors were similar to those reported in Canada (25%) and N.Z. (23%), lower than in U.S. (28%), and higher than in the U.K. (18%).

Care Coordination

By design, all Australians participating in the survey had health problems, including more intense contact with medical care. The survey revealed that these adults often saw multiple physicians and frequently encountered problems in the coordination of their care.

- Nearly a quarter (23%) of Australians received conflicting information about their care from different health professionals (Figure 3).
- Thirteen percent reported they were sent for duplicate tests or procedures by different health professionals, and 14 percent found their records or test results did not reach their doctors' office in time for an appointment.



- Three of five (59%) Australians with health problems saw three or more doctors in the past two years. Those seeing multiple physicians were more likely to experience care coordination problems.
- Australian rates of coordination problems were in the low-to middle-range of the five-nation survey (Figure 4).

Australia Figure 4
Care Coordination Problems

Percent in the past two years:	AUS	CAN	NZ	UK	US
Had to tell the same story to multiple health professionals	49	50	47	49	57
Received conflicting information from different health professionals	23	23	24	19	26
Sent for duplicate tests by different health professionals	13	20	17	13	22
Records/tests didn't reach office in time for appointment	14	19	16	23	25

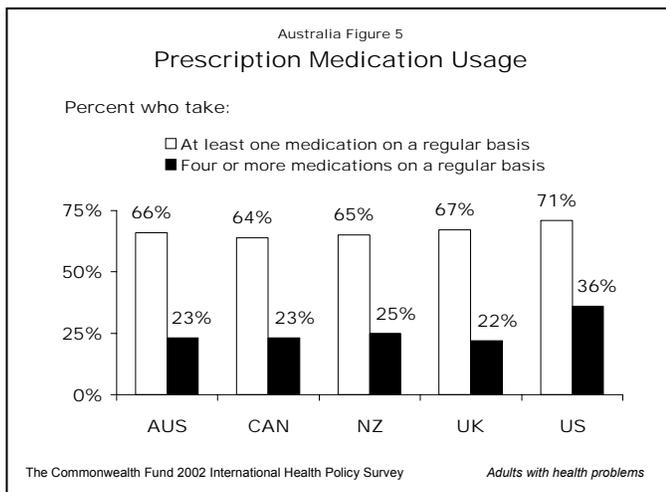
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Prescription Drugs

Australians with health problems rely heavily on prescription drugs. Yet, the survey found that many Australians have not reviewed or discussed their prescriptions with their doctor.

- Two of three (66%) Australians with health problems take a prescription drug regularly, and one-fourth (23%) take four or more drugs (Figure 5).
- In spite of this widespread use, 31 percent of Australians taking medications regularly said their doctor had not discussed all of their medications with them. Even among those taking four or more medications,

29 percent reported that their physician had not reviewed their roster of medications.



- Fifteen percent reported that they had stopped taking a prescription drug without their doctor's advice because of side effects. One of 10 (11%) said their medicines had serious side effects that their doctor had not discussed.
- Comparison of Australian experiences with prescription drugs to other countries indicates these issues are a shared concern.

Doctor-Patient Communication and Physician Ratings

Patients' experiences and care outcomes often depend on clear communication with their doctors. The survey indicates deficiencies and missed opportunities for effective communication between Australians and their doctors.

- One-half (51%) of Australians with health problems said that their regular doctor does not ask for their ideas and opinions about their care. Nearly a quarter (23%) said their doctor does not make clear the specific goals for treatment.
- Nearly one-third (31%) reported an occasion when they did not follow their doctor's advice or treatment plan. The leading reason was disagreeing with the doctor's recommendation (37%). Thirty-one percent said that the doctor's plan was too difficult to follow, and 21 percent said it cost too much (Figure 6).
- One of five (21%) left their doctor's office without getting answers to important health questions.

Australia Figure 6
Communication with Doctors

Percent in the past two years:	AUS	CAN	NZ	UK	US
Left a doctor's office without getting important questions answered	21	25	20	19	31
Did not follow a doctor's advice	31	31	27	21	39

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Adults with health problems

- Patients with serious and chronic illnesses often face emotional strain. Yet, more than half (54%) of Australians with health problems said that their regular physician had not discussed the emotional burden of coping with their condition.

In spite of such shortcomings, the survey found that Australians with health problems generally have positive views of their physicians. Their average physician ratings on five dimensions of care (ability to diagnose problems, spending enough time, being accessible, listening to their health concerns, and treating them with dignity and respect) were among the highest in the five-nation survey. This finding repeated a pattern reported in the 2001 survey of the general population.²

- On average, 68 percent rated their doctors as "excellent" or "very good" (N.Z. 73%; CAN 62%; U.K. 60%; U.S. 59%).

Waiting Times

The survey indicates Australian concerns with access to specialist care and waiting times for hospital admissions.

- Two of five (41%) Australians reported that it was "very" (17%) or "somewhat" (24%) difficult to see a specialist when needed (Figure 7). Among the group reporting such difficulties, most (74%) cite long waiting times. Seventeen percent also said that costs or lack of private insurance made access difficult.
- One of five (20%) Australians reported that long waits for hospital admittance were a "big problem" in the past two years.

² *Australian Adults' Health System Views and Experiences, 2001*, The Commonwealth Fund (Pub. #551), May 2002.

Australia Figure 7
Difficulty Seeing a Specialist
and Waiting Problems

Percent reporting:	AUS	CAN	NZ	UK	US
Very or somewhat difficult to see specialist	41	53	36	38	40
The following were "big problems" in the past two years:					
Long waits for hospital admission	20	28	21	19	13
Long waits for doctor's appointment	17	24	5	21	14
Delay of scheduled surgery or procedure due to cancellation	10	16	9	10	5

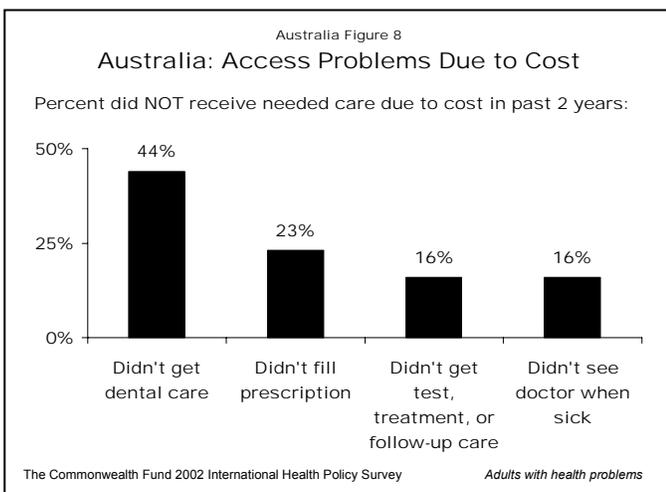
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- Among those who had used or tried to use emergency rooms in the previous two years, nearly one-third (31%) reported that delays were a big problem.

Access Problems Due to Cost

Australians with health problems also reported not getting needed care due to cost in the past two years, particularly for dental care and prescription drugs.

- Nearly one of four (23%) Australians reported not filling a prescription and 44 percent reported forgoing needed dental care due to costs (Figure 8).



- Sixteen percent did not visit a doctor when sick and the same percentage did not get a recommended test, treatment, or follow-up care due to costs.
- Australians reported cost-related barriers to care at rates similar to those reported in New Zealand, but at higher rates than reported in Canada or the U.K.

Except for dental, Australian rates were significantly lower than those reported in the U.S.

Views of the Health Care System

- Thirty-five percent of Australians said that they were dissatisfied with their country's health care system—a rate similar to that reported by Canadians (36%) and the British (31%), but lower than that reported by Americans (44%) and New Zealanders (48%).
- Australians who were dissatisfied with their health care system were more likely than those satisfied to report medical errors, coordination problems, or access problems.
- When asked to name the two biggest problems with the health care system, Australians most frequently mentioned waiting times (31%) and a shortage of health professionals or hospital beds (31%). Inadequate government funding (20%) and the high cost of health care (19%) were also leading concerns.
- Asked to identify the single most important action the government could take to improve the health care system, Australian adults were most likely to suggest increasing funding for health care (30%) or adding more resources (14%).

Survey Methods

The Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey consisted of interviews with adults with health problems in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The survey screened initial random samples of adults 18 or older to identify those who met at least one of four criteria: reported their health as fair or poor; or in the past two years had serious illness that required intensive medical care, major surgery, or hospitalization for something other than a normal birth. These questions resulted in final survey samples of: AUS 844; CAN 750; N.Z. 750; U.K. 750; and U.S. 755. These samples represent one-fourth to one-third of the adults initially contacted. Harris Interactive, Inc., and country affiliates conducted the interviews by telephone between March and May 2002. Please see the [Health Affairs](#) article for significant differences among each country.

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