



# The New Zealand Health Care System: Views and Experiences of Adults with Health Problems

## Findings from the Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey

According to the Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey, nearly half of New Zealanders with health problems were dissatisfied with their health care system—the highest level of dissatisfaction in this survey of adults in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Yet, New Zealanders also gave their physicians the highest ratings in the five-nation survey and stand out for reporting few problems waiting to see their regular doctors.

New Zealanders with health problems are also at risk for medical or medication errors, a concern shared in the other four countries. Nearly one of four New Zealanders reported a medical or medication error in the past two years, with one of seven (14%) reporting an error that caused serious health problems.

Reports also indicated care coordination problems and missed opportunities for more effective communication between physicians and their patients. Coordination problems as well as medical errors were more frequent among those seeing multiple physicians, a pattern repeated throughout the five-nation survey.

Waiting times, inadequate funding, costs, and shortages were the leading problems cited by New Zealanders for their national system. In addition, responses to questions about going without needed care due to cost indicate that costs can be an access barrier.

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 include: 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 past two years. In New Zealand as well as the other four countries, these

adults are among the most intensive users of the health care system and are particularly vulnerable to variations in quality and to cost or access barriers. Comparative findings from the five-nation survey were reported in the May/June 2003 issue of *Health Affairs*.<sup>1</sup>

### Patient Safety: Medical/Medication Errors

New Zealanders with health problems are at high risk for medical errors based on survey responses.

- Nearly one of four (23%) New Zealanders with health problems reported a medical mistake or medication error in their personal care (Figure 1).

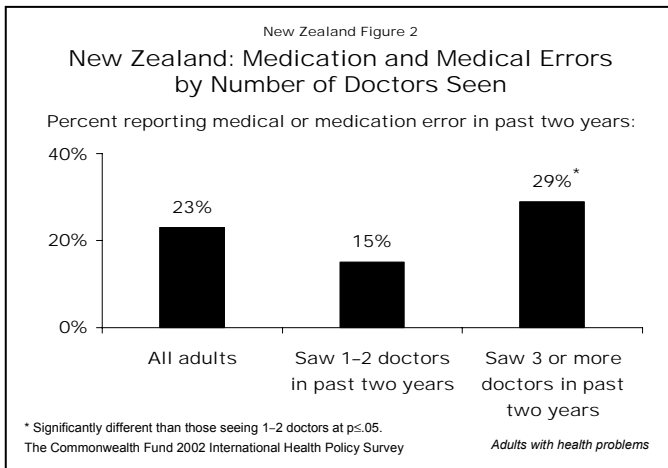
New Zealand Figure 1  
Medication and Medical Errors

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 who reported an error, three-fifths said that the error had caused a serious health problem. Including all New Zealanders surveyed, one of seven (14%) reported a medical error that had caused a serious health problem in the past two years.
- Those seeing multiple doctors reported errors at twice the rate of those who had seen only one or two doctors. (29% vs. 15%) (Figure 2).
- New Zealand error rates were similar to those in the other four countries.

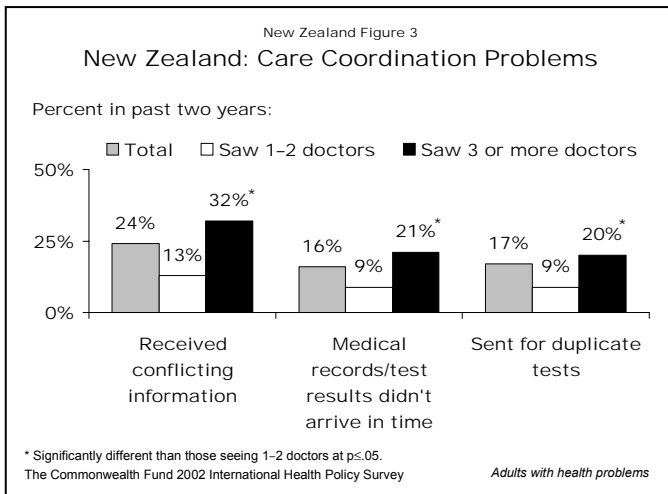
<sup>1</sup> R. J. Blendon, C. Schoen, C. DesRoches, R. Osborn, and K. Zapert, "Common Concerns Amid Diverse Systems: Health Care Experiences in Five Countries," *Health Affairs* 22 (May/June 2003): 106–21.



### Care Coordination

By design, all New Zealanders participating in the survey had either current or recent health problems. The survey found that these adults often saw multiple physicians, and their experiences indicate frequent problems with coordination of care.

- One-fourth (24%) of New Zealanders said they received conflicting information from different doctors or health professionals (Figure 3).



- Seventeen percent were sent for duplicate tests by different doctors or health professionals, and 16 percent said their medical records or test results did not reach their doctor's office in time for their appointment.
- Care coordination problems were more frequent among those who had visited multiple doctors.

- New Zealand rates of care coordination problems were at the low- to mid-range of the five-nation survey (Figure 4).

**New Zealand Figure 4**  
Care Coordination Problems

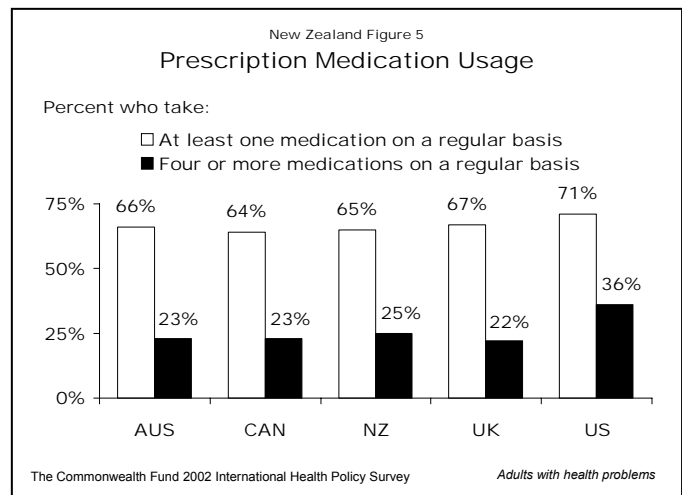
Percent in the past two years:	AUS	CAN	NZ	UK	US
Had to tell the same story to multiple health professionals	49	50	47	49	57
Received conflicting information from different health professionals	23	23	24	19	26
Sent for duplicate tests by different health professionals	13	20	17	13	22
Records/tests didn't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

The Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey  
Adults with health problems

### Prescription Drugs

New Zealanders with health problems rely heavily on prescription drugs, many taking multiple medications. Yet, these patients often report that their doctors had not reviewed or discussed all their prescriptions with them.

- Two-thirds (65%) use prescription drugs on a regular basis. One-fourth take four or more prescription medicines. These rates were similar to those reported in Australia, Canada, and the U.K. (Figure 5).



- Among New Zealanders taking prescription medications regularly, one-quarter (23%) said their doctor had not reviewed all of their medications with them. Even among those taking four or more medicines, 23 percent said their physician had not discussed their medications in the past two years.

- Side effects were also a concern. Sixteen percent of New Zealanders with health problems reported that they stopped taking a prescription medication without their doctor's advice because of side effects they had experienced, and nearly one of 10 (9%) reported taking a drug that had serious side effects that their doctor had not discussed.

## Doctor–Patient Communication and Physician Ratings

Patients' experiences and care outcomes often depend on clear communication with their doctors. However, survey responses indicate deficiencies in communication and missed opportunities for more effective communication between New Zealanders and their doctors.

- Nearly half of New Zealanders (47%) reported that their doctor does not ask about their ideas and opinions about their care or treatment, and one-quarter said their doctor does not make clear the specific goals for their treatment.
- One-third (34%) of New Zealanders said that their doctor doesn't keep them motivated and 17 percent said their doctor does not help them understand what they need to do for their health.
- One-fifth of New Zealanders left a doctor's office without getting important questions answered (Figure 6).

New Zealand 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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- More than a quarter (27%) said that they did not follow their doctor's advice or treatment plan at least once in the previous two years. The leading reason for not doing so was disagreeing with what the doctor recommended (35%). Thirty percent said they

found the course of treatment too difficult and 25 percent said it cost too much.

- Yet, New Zealanders were at the low end in the survey for reports of not getting questions answered or not following doctors' recommendations.

Overall, adults with health problems in New Zealand gave their physicians the highest ratings in the five-nation survey.

- On average, 73 percent rated their physicians as "excellent" or "very good" 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 (AUS 68%; CAN 62%; U.K. 60%; U.S. 59%).
- New Zealanders' reports were especially positive about having enough time and access to their primary physicians. This finding repeated patterns observed in the 2001 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey.<sup>2</sup>

## Waiting Times

New Zealanders with health problems often found it difficult to see a specialist when needed and reported problems with waiting times for hospital care. Yet, few New Zealanders reported problems with waits to see their regular doctor.

- More than one-third (36%) reported it was "very" (12%) or "somewhat" (24%) difficult to see a specialist when needed. Waiting times were the most frequent reason cited, and costs were also a concern (Figure 7).
- One-fifth (21%) said long waits for hospitals had been a "big problem."
- Among the five countries, New Zealanders were the least likely to say that waits to get an appointment with their doctor had been a big problem—only 5 percent of New Zealanders reported this. The 2001 survey of the general population also found evidence of ready access in New Zealand: 69 percent of New Zealanders said they were able to see their doctor on the day they sought an appointment, compared with

<sup>2</sup> *New Zealand Adults' Health System Views and Experiences, 2001*, The Commonwealth Fund (Pub. #553), May 2002.

62 percent in Australia, 42 percent in the U.K., 36 percent in the U.S., and 35 percent in Canada.

New Zealand 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

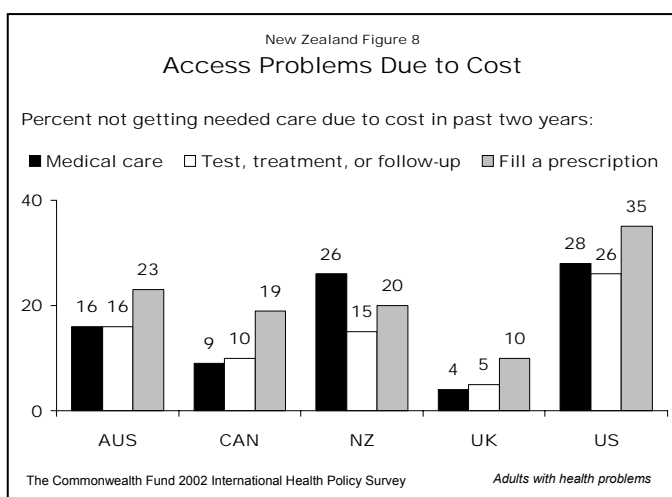
The Commonwealth Fund 2002 International Health Policy Survey Adults with health problems

- Among those who had used or tried to use emergency rooms in the previous two years, more than a quarter (28%) reported that delays were a big problem.

### Access Problems Due to Cost

Many New Zealanders with health problems went without needed care due to cost, particularly for dental and medical care.

- More than a quarter (26%) of New Zealanders did not see a doctor when sick due to cost and 15 percent did not get a recommended test, treatment, or follow-up care (Figure 8).



- One-fifth did not fill a prescription due to cost.
- A greater percent of New Zealanders experienced problems affording dental care: nearly half (47%) reported

not getting needed care due to cost in the past two years. With the exception of the U.K., rates of forgone dental care due to cost were also high in the other countries (AUS 44%; U.S. 40%; CAN 35%; U.K. 21%).

### Views of the Health Care System

- Adults with health problems in New Zealand were more likely than adults in the other four countries to say they were dissatisfied with their health care system. Almost half (48%) said they were "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with their health care system, compared with 44 percent of Americans, 36 percent of Canadians, 35 percent of Australians, and 31 percent of U.K. respondents.
- New Zealanders who were dissatisfied with their nation's health care system were more likely to report medical errors, coordination of care problems, and concerns over waiting times and access to care than were those who said they were satisfied.
- When asked to name the two biggest problems with the health care system, two-fifths (41%) of New Zealanders cited long waiting times. Inadequate government funding (23%), the high cost of health care (21%), and shortages of health professionals/hospital beds (20%) were also leading concerns.

### 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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