

Executive summary

Communities want healthcare systems that offer value and provide high quality, safe care

People want long, healthy lives.

Communities want healthcare systems that offer value and provide high quality, safe care.

The goal of all healthcare systems is therefore to improve the health of the population they serve in an efficient way. To reach this goal it is important to understand the keys to high performance and to what extent they feature in our own healthcare system.

We need to ask: are healthcare services effective, appropriate, safe and delivered on the basis of clinical need? To what degree are they patient-focused? Can people access care when and where they need it? Do services have enough resources and how do costs of care compare?

When we ask questions about our population's health, external factors, as well as health system performance, inform the answer. External factors include lifestyle and socioeconomic circumstance and are largely outside the control of healthcare systems.

Healthcare in Focus: how NSW compares internationally takes a comprehensive look at how the NSW health system compares to the rest of Australia and 10 other countries. To do this, the Bureau mainly used data from the 2010 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In making these comparisons, the report travels across international borders. It examines performance in both private and public sectors; in the hospital system and in primary care.

This performance information focuses on three main areas: how healthy NSW people are compared to those in other countries; how system performance as a whole compares; and what value NSW gets from the healthcare dollars it spends compared to funds spent internationally.

The report includes almost 90 performance measures, selected on the basis of comparable information from overseas. As a result, the report does not align directly with performance priorities identified for NSW. It does, however, include information that might inform future priorities.

Comparative performance is summarised in each chapter with a simple ranking scheme. In setting the performance of NSW alongside the rest of Australia and 10 other countries, the report ranks jurisdictions in order of achievement. The top four are ranked 'higher', the next four 'middle' and the bottom four 'lower'.

Healthcare in Focus deliberately looks at the big picture, taking a step back from the more granular approach of other Bureau publications such as *Hospital Quarterly*. While examining hospital-based performance targets is important for public policy and patient care, it is also enlightening to step back from the trees and take a look at the entire forest.

So what did we find?

Health and lifestyle determinants

Nearly 60% of NSW adults rate their own health as either excellent or very good – a higher percentage than in most other countries. Our life expectancy is long and deaths from cancer and heart disease have decreased dramatically in the past decade. Improvements over time in the health of NSW people are considerable when placed in an international context.

Yet nearly 70% of adults in NSW say they have been diagnosed with a long-term health condition, a greater proportion than that seen internationally. NSW also struggles with an obesity problem but we are not alone. More than 60% of people are either overweight or obese, ranking NSW in the middle of other countries. These findings are important, given that chronic disease and rising rates of obesity have ongoing implications for the healthcare system.

Effectiveness and appropriateness

Measuring effectiveness and appropriateness gives an insight into whether the people of NSW receive healthcare that works.

The report found that years of life lost to circulatory disease and cancer have fallen, reflecting positively on healthcare interventions in the state. Most adults report receiving appropriate monitoring tests for blood pressure and cholesterol, ranking NSW high among the countries surveyed.

There are however, areas where current performance levels may be of concern. Caesarean section rates in NSW are high by international standards (almost 30% of live births) and have increased more rapidly than in other countries. Although a caesarean section is appropriate for

some mothers, it involves risks and requires more resources than a vaginal delivery.

In 2010, among NSW adults hospitalised in the previous two years, about one in six reported returning to hospital because of complications. This is significantly higher than France and Switzerland and lower than the United Kingdom.

People with diabetes also experience preventable complications, such as amputations, at a greater rate than in other countries. In NSW, the rate of diabetes-associated lower limb amputation is 18 per 100,000 of the population, which is surpassed only by the United States and suggests there are opportunities for improvement.

Safety

In primary care, more than 70% of people taking at least one prescription say a GP or staff member at their regular place of care reviewed their medications and explained potential side effects. When being discharged from hospital, nearly 70% of people are given written instructions about what to do when they return home. Internationally, NSW adults are among the most likely to receive these on leaving hospital.

NSW achieves a middle ranking when it comes to test delays and medication error. While most people receive timely test results, 6% of patients who had a medical test in the previous two years report experiencing a delay in receiving abnormal results and 5% report being given the wrong medication by a healthcare professional.

In NSW 10% of people think a medical mistake has been made in their care in the past two years, although the extent of harm was not assessed. In this area NSW has a lower ranking.

Access and timeliness

More than 60% of adults are able to get a same-day or next-day primary care appointment, and more than 80% who visit emergency departments say they waited less than four hours for treatment. More than half though, find it difficult to access after-hours medical care without going to the emergency department. NSW achieves a middle ranking on these three measures.

About one in six of patients who received elective surgery (in public or private hospitals) reported waiting more than six months for their operation. Compared to other countries, NSW ranks lower on this measure of timeliness.

Areas for improvement may include cost barriers to care. About one in six people with a medical problem in the previous year did not visit a doctor because of cost concerns and nearly 10% of people do not visit the doctor because of travel difficulties. Compared to other countries, NSW ranks lower on these measures of access, though the percentage of adults reporting travel difficulties were not dissimilar to other large countries.

Person centredness

Healthcare systems that are person centred have communities that actively participate in efforts to achieve a good system and place patients at the centre of their medical treatment. In this area, NSW generally achieves high rankings compared to other countries.

Most adults for example, rate the care given by their GP as excellent or very good. Most people say their regular GP always knows important information about their medical history, always spends enough time with them and always involves them as much as they want to be in decisions about their care. More than 60% have their care co-ordinated by someone in their regular GP practice. In these areas NSW achieves high rankings.

Patients have observed problems in sending their medical details to GPs after leaving hospital, with a sizeable minority reporting difficulties in information flow to general practice after a visit to the ED (about 30%), or hospitalisation (about 20%). NSW ranks lower on this measure.

More than 70% are confident they will receive the most effective treatment if they become seriously ill, though fewer people in NSW are confident in this area than those in other countries.

At the same time, almost a quarter say the Australian healthcare system works pretty well, and half say there are some good things about the system but fundamental changes are needed. A quarter of adults say the Australian healthcare system has so much wrong with it that it needs a complete rebuild. Among Australians these views have remained stable since 2001.

Equity

Although the overall health and wellbeing of NSW people is high compared to other countries, there are considerable disparities in the health status of different groups within the state.

Healthcare in Focus shows that people who live in more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas have more health problems but do not always receive more care.

People with below average income are less likely to report good or excellent health status or have confidence in receiving the most effective care than people with above average income. Relative to other countries the income-associated gap in health status or confidence places NSW in the middle ranking.

Across rural NSW, people have a lower life expectancy than those living in cities. They also have higher rates of potentially preventable hospitalisations.

Aboriginal mothers are more likely to have low birth-weight or pre-term babies compared to non-Aboriginal mothers. This places infants at increased risk of ill health. As adults, Aboriginal people are more likely to be hospitalised for a range of medical conditions and have a lower life expectancy than non-Aboriginal people.

Resources, activity and sustainability

In 2007, the people of NSW spent \$4,727 on average per person on public and private healthcare. After accounting for differences in currency, this ranks mid-range relative to 20 similar countries, including those featured in our report and founding European Union members. In 2008, NSW had slightly more nurses and more GPs per person than most other countries. NSW is similar to other countries in terms of the number of working doctors and beds per 1,000 of the population.

Overall then, how does NSW perform?

Considering the health of NSW people ranks highly compared to other countries and that state health spending is mid-range compared to other nations' spending, NSW does well in achieving health per dollar spent. No country spends less per person than NSW and has better health.

The state has made significant health gains over recent years and is an international leader in this area. At the same time, *Healthcare in Focus* identifies where NSW needs to do better and points to countries it can learn from.

Learning from success and focusing attention on areas for improvement are critically important in the quest to deliver high-quality, safe healthcare services to people when they need them.