North-south divide in health persists in England

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

People in the south of England continue to enjoy a healthier and longer life than those in the north, new government data show.

Although life expectancy has increased throughout England, figures from the *Health Profile of*

England report show that women living in the north live on average one year less than women in the south. The life expectancy of men in northern England is two years less than that of men in the south of the country.

Rates of smoking and obesity are highest in the northern parts of England. Boston, in Lincolnshire, has the highest prevalence of obesity of any town.

The United Kingdom has the highest prevalence of obesity in Europe, says the report. The prevalence among adults is 23%. In August the Department of Health predicted that 13 million

people in England would be obese by 2010 if no action were taken to curb the rise (*BMJ* 2006;333:463, 2 Sep).

The new report sets out the progress made by the government in improving public health since it published its white paper *Choosing Health* in 2004. The report says that 1.2 million people have stopped smoking since 1998.

However, people living in Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, and the North East have an above average likelihood of dying from a smoking related disease.

In another report, *Health Challenge England: Next Steps for Choosing Health*, the government sets out the next stage of its programme for action.

It says that campaigns to improve public health need to shift from a "one size fits all" approach to one that focuses on how people live their lives to help them change their behaviour.

It gives the example of last year's campaign to help young people quit smoking, which highlighted how smoking can affect looks, sex appeal, and fertility.

The public health minister, Caroline Flint, said: "*Health Challenge England* will push this new approach forward. It will

put people in the driving seat to make the changes they need to lead healthier lives.

"Our initial focus will be obese adults and children. The rapid increase in child and adult obesity over the past decade is storing up very serious health problems for the future.

"Effective action on diet and exercise will help to tackle future heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and a range of factors critical to health like mental wellbeing.

"We have learnt that often parents who are overweight or obese find it difficult to assess their children's weight status and appreciate the associated health risks for their children and themselves.

"Parents are not always embracing healthy eating and active lifestyles as it is perceived to be too challenging. We want to support parents to make them feel more able to make the changes that are needed to make a big difference to their own – and their children's lives."

The government's new obesity social marketing strategy will be launched next year. □

Regional variation in England in mortality from smoking among people aged ≥35 (2002-4)

No of deaths per 100 000 people attributable to smoking (average for England = 125)

■ ≥127
■ 120-126.9
■ <120

Source: Department of Health

Ignorance about HIV is still high in many parts of Europe

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Almost all Europeans are aware that HIV can be contracted by receiving blood or having unprotected sex with someone who is HIV positive or by using an infected needle. However, many misconceptions remain.

In a survey released this month covering 29 countries in Europe, 94% of those questioned accurately identified these potential sources. But four in 10 people incorrectly believed that the disease can be caught by kissing someone on the mouth. Awareness is highest in France, where 69% realised that this is not a form of transmission, Denmark (59%), the Netherlands (58%), and Belgium (53%).

At the other end of the scale, ignorance is widespread in Slo-

vakia, Cyprus, Lithuania, and Greece, where more than 70% of respondents considered kissing to be a definite or potential way of becoming infected.

Comparison with a similar survey conducted two years earlier shows that the percentage of correct answers has increased substantially in France (up 19%), Germany (10%), and Belgium (9%). However, the proportion of wrong responses has grown in Italy (up 11%), Spain (8%), and the United Kingdom (6%).

The survey interviewed some 25 000 people over 15 years old in the 25 countries of the European Union as well as Bulgaria and Romania, which will join the EU in January 2007, and Croatia and Turkey, which are negotiat-

ing membership. Around half of the respondents were aware that it is not possible to become infected by drinking from a glass or sitting on a toilet seat that has been used by someone who has AIDS or is HIV positive or by giving blood. An even higher percentage—more than 70%—know that it is not risky to eat a meal prepared by infected people, shake their hand, or handle objects they have touched.

Again, the different nationalities show major differences. While 89% of Swedes know that it is impossible to become infected with HIV by giving blood, the figure among Slovaks is just 16%. Slovaks are also the least informed about the consequences of shaking hands. Just under two thirds know that there is no risk; in the Netherlands the figure is 96%.

When asked whether the emergence and spread of AIDS had led them to take precautions during sexual intercourse, the

respondents were almost evenly split: 48% said they did but 41% did not. Cypriots and Austrians are the most careful; the Dutch, Lithuanians, and Latvians the least.

Two thirds of the respondents considered that their country's treatment and health care for infected people are effective. Satisfaction is particularly high in Belgium and the Netherlands (both at 83%) and Italy and Sweden (82%). But in Latvia and Estonia the percentage is only 25%.

Markos Kyprianou, the EU health commissioner, attacked any sense of complacency, saying: "I am most worried about the decreasing attention on prevention. We have to promote education, the use of sterile needles and syringes, and especially safer sex." □

Aids Prevention: Special Eurobarometer is at http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_publication/eurobarometers_en.htm.