CORRESPONDENCE

The German Health Care System in International Comparison – A Patient Perspective

by Dr. rer. medic. Klaus Koch, Dr. rer. nat. Christoph Schürmann, Prof. Dr. med. Peter T. Sawicki in volume 24/2010

Ratings From Members of Statutory Health Insurance Schemes

The authors present some interesting data and interpretations, but they are obviously keen to avoid interpreting one important aspect: the greater degree of dissatisfaction of German patients with their healthcare system, compared with other countries, correlates with their (statistical) insurance status.

With a proportion of 11%, Germany has a rate of privately insured patients that is several orders of magnitude lower than in other countries, where the same surveys were conducted but the results showed a higher degree of satisfaction.

This is not mitigated by the fact that the authors, in an extended table, have included the additional insurance schemes in Germany at a seemingly higher percentage. The survey was mainly concerned with patients' satisfaction with outpatient care, and additional insurance schemes, such as those that are available in Germany for inpatient services, are not relevant in this context.

If the overwhelming majority of survey participants in Germany were in favor of substantial, partly even fundamental, changes to the healthcare system, then, according to the data presented in the article, this type of assessment came primarily from members of statutory health insurance schemes.

A precise differentiation of ratings of Germany's healthcare system according to insurance status should be possible and would be interesting.

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In Reply:

We are happy to meet Dr Schmidt's request for a more precise differentiation by type of insurance. In Germany, 38.7% of people in private health insurance schemes are of the opinion that the country's healthcare system works well and requires only small changes. At 22.5%, this proportion is notably lower among

members of statutory health insurance schemes, it is similarly low in those with statutory insurance plans with add-on plans (for example, for inpatient care) (24.8%). Fundamental changes to the healthcare system are considered necessary by 41.8% (private insurance), 51.4% (statutory insurance), and 51.9 % (statutory insurance with add-on insurance), 19.5% (private insurance), 26.1% (statutory insurance) and 23.4% (statutory insurance with add-on plan) think there is so much wrong with the German healthcare system that it needs complete reorganization. 53.7% of privately insured patients rated the quality of care received in the preceding 12 months as excellent or very good. This is a notably higher proportion than among patients with statutory health insurance (31.2%) and patients with statutory insurance and add-on insurance (42.2%); 41%, 55.7% and 49.6%, respectively, rated their care as "good". It is possible that shorter waiting times and earlier treatment dates played a part in the greater satisfaction expressed by privately insured patients. 76% of privately insured patients and 72% of those with statutory health insurance with add-on insurance were given appointments on the same day or the next day, compared with 56% of patients with just statutory health insurance. Very few (6.9%) privately insured patients had to wait longer than 4 weeks for an appointment to see a specialist, compared with 33.2% of members of statutory health insurance schemes and 25.5% of those with statutory health insurance and add-on schemes. Access to treatment for emergencies at weekends or on bank holidays, however, is independent of insurance status in Germany. Irrespective of which type of insurance cover they had, access to telephone consultations was rated as easy or very easy by two thirds of survey participants.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors of both contributions declare that no conflict of interest exists according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.