NHS care in England is still not centred on patients

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Surveys involving more than a million NHS patients in England show that although certain areas of health care, such as waiting times, cancer care, and coronary heart disease, have improved in recent years, patient centred care is still not routine. Results of the 15 surveys done between 1998 and 2005 by the Picker Institute, which runs the national patient survey programme for the NHS in England, show that patients still want more information about their treatment and to be involved more in decisions about their care. They also want more help transferring from hospital to home and easier access to their GP with appointments at more convenient times.

Angela Coulter, chief execu-

tive of the Picker Institute, said, "This is the first time that the views of so many patients have been pulled together in one report. While the quality of the care has improved for patients in specific priority groups, others have seen little improvements. Levels of satisfaction are high and improving, but these overall ratings mask some key problem areas."

Hospital cleanliness was among patients' chief concerns, and many patients need better pain relief and more information about the potential side effects of their medications, say the surveys.

The results of the surveys clearly show that improvements have been made where the gov-

ernment has set national targets. For example, the number of people waiting for more than three months for an outpatient appointment fell from 25% in 2003 to 17% in 2004. Similarly, 80% of cancer patients saw a specialist within one month of referral in 2004 compared with 70% in 2000.

In 2004, however, half of inpatients and a third of outpatients, emergency department patients, and primary care patients said they would have liked more say in what happened to them. Of every 10 patients, four said that they were not told about how to look after themselves and what danger signals to look out for. And half of all mental health patients said

that they had not been given a number to call if they needed help out of office hours.

"Many aspects of patients' experience still need urgent attention. The future of health care in the [United Kingdom] has become a battlefield for all the main parties in the lead up to the election. The results of these patient surveys demonstrate that politicians need to listen to what the public is saying and make sure that their views count. In this case, it's the patient who knows best, not the doctor—and certainly not always the politician," said Professor Coulter. □

Is the NHS getting better or worse? is available at www.pickereurope.org.

FDA panel approves one make of silicone breast implant in the US

Ray Moynihan *Washington, DC*

A panel of advisers to the US Food and Drug Administration last week unexpectedly recommended approving silicone breast implants made by Mentor Corporation, just one day after rejecting a similar product from a competing firm.

In a seven-two vote last Wednesday, the panel recommended approving silicone breast implants but attached nine conditions. The conditions included more rigorous monitoring of safety issues, including the effects on pregnant women; mandatory education for doctors and patients; and setting up a national register of recipients. On Tuesday, however, the panel had voted five-four against approving silicone implants made by a competitor, Inamed Corporation, because of a lack of convincing evidence of safety.

Both companies have been trying to overturn a ban imposed more than 10 years ago. Silicone breast implants were effectively taken off the market in 1992 in the United States. This was because of widespread public concern about a range of health effects, including localised effects of implants rupturing and the potential for more serious illness, including connective tissue diseases.

In the past decade, implants have been available to women only for breast reconstruction after cancer and only within the context of long term trials. Some of these trials were designed to run for 10 years.

Three years' data from these trials presented at the FDA advisory hearings by Mentor showed that rates of rupture with their implants were less than 1%. Two

A silicone breast implant has been recommended for use in the US, 13 years after such implants were effectively taken off the US market

panel members argued strongly that the evidence was too preliminary to support approval, however. Amy Newburger said that it was "still too soon" to know about the safety of either company's implants. And Brent Blumenstein argued that there was "too much uncertainty" in the evidence, highlighting data that showed that implants may

increase the risk of symptoms of connective tissue diseases.

In contrast, panel member Cheryl Ewing, who voted to approve Mentor's implants, told the public hearing that she was impressed by the "compelling support for this device" from many experts and professional organisations with an interest in silicone breast implants. □