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NHS Leads The World

The NHS has come top of an international comparison of healthcare systems. The finding by the Washington-based Commonwealth Fund refutes the continuing campaign of denigration of both the quality and cost of England's health service by the Government and much of the media.

The Commonwealth Fund, whose work is internationally respected, compared the health systems of 11 countries. Apart from the UK these were New Zealand, Australia, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada and the United States.

The US was ranked last for both quality and cost despite its largely private system being a model to which many proponents of British free-market healthcare are looking. Health expenditure per person in the US is \$8,508 while in the UK it is \$3,405. Only New Zealand spends less out of the 11 countries.

The results pre-date the implementation of President Obama's "affordable care" changes which are designed to extend health insurance to some people who have been outside the system up till now, mainly because of low incomes and having employers who refuse to pay contributions.

To reach its conclusions, the Commonwealth Fund looked at several sources of information including evidence from the World Health Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as well as surveys of patients and doctors and its own health system scorecard of 2011.

Although the UK contains four diverging national health systems, the Commonwealth Fund's conclusions cover the whole country.

The UK was ranked top for quality including management of chronic illness, and for access and efficiency. Its use of information technology was judged to play an important part in its success. The UK was in a good third place for the timeliness of its care including waiting times.

Troubling findings for the UK concern life expectancy, infant mortality and death rates for treatable conditions. These results were grouped in a "healthy lives" indicator on which the UK came second from bottom.

English healthcare is now undergoing fundamental changes which must raise questions about whether the NHS can hang on to its top overall position in future reports by the Commonwealth Fund.

A drastic squeeze on funding of the NHS in England is increasing the pressure on NHS commissioners to outsource services to low bidders from the private sector in compliance with the competition regime introduced by the Coalition Government.