

1 Introduction

Introduction

International Health – How Australia Compares examines Australia's international standing for a range of different health indicators. It is generally recognised that Australians enjoy good health, that Australia is one of the healthiest countries in the world, and that the health of its people, by and large, continues to improve (AIHW 1998).

Health, however, is difficult to conceptualise and measure. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. Measurement of these aspects of health and their international comparisons have proved problematic. There is no single indicator that summarises health status. The range of indicators included in this publication paint Australia's health status with a broad brush only, but do allow judgment to be made as to whether or not Australia enjoys the status of 'one of the healthiest countries in the world'.

Generally the picture is favourable but, as always, there is room for improvement. For example, Australia lags behind a number of countries for life expectancy, both in total number of years and years free from disability. It ranks in the middle of a 'league table' for infant mortality and is placed behind several countries for each of our National Health Priority Areas – cardiovascular health, cancer control, injury prevention and control, mental health and diabetes. Although not examined here, several segments of Australian society, including Indigenous people, do not enjoy good health at all (AIHW 1998).

Any assertion about the performance of Australia's health system must also be based on monitoring and comparing different indicators of health. Australia's health system can be monitored and compared over time in order to note improvements or areas of concern, but monitoring and comparing with other health systems is useful, since:

...comparing health systems internationally can help to raise questions about one's own system. In addition, looking at other systems can furnish alternative ideas and help establish new models of care. Furthermore, studying other systems can help us avoid pitfalls already experienced by professionals working in those other systems. The efforts of other societies in their health systems can inspire in us an openmindedness for change, a value that is often lacking in traditional planning and decision making. (Ellencweig 1992, p. vii)

Comparison countries

Nineteen developed countries were chosen for comparison with Australia. Most of these are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and others, such as Singapore and the former British crown colony of Hong Kong, represent significant regional interests. Regarding Germany, data before 1990 are for the former Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany.

Developed countries were selected to allow comparisons between Australia and other countries with similar socioeconomic structures, health systems or standards of living. Large differentials in health status are recognised between developed and developing countries – what is not so well understood is that differentials also exist among developed countries. It is the presence of these differentials and the reasons for their continued existence that may help to identify areas for improvement within Australia's health system.

An indicator-based approach

The approach taken in this report has been to construct a wide range of health indicators that relate to various dimensions of health and wellbeing. Although no simple set of statistics can measure the success or failure of a health system, the health status measures presented here allow a broad view of how Australia compares to other developed countries on various aspects of health.

The largest proportion of health indicators presented here concern births and deaths, since in developed countries almost all such events are registered in a broadly standard fashion, thus allowing for easy comparison. Morbidity measures, concerning illness and disability, are equally important but are complicated by widely differing conceptualisation, measurement and analysis between countries. Fewer morbidity measures are available for international comparison.

Introduction

For the indicators presented here, there may be certain differences in data collection and recording between countries that may complicate international comparisons – these are noted when known. The background information on environmental and demographic aspects of populations in various countries provided in the report puts some of these issues in proper perspective.

The set of health indicators included in this report encompass the following broad categories:

- population
- fertility and pregnancy
- important causes of ill-health
- mortality
- health services and resources, and
- health determinants.

Data sources and classification

International comparisons are possible only if accurate national health measures are available. The data presented here are sourced mainly from WHO and United Nations annual publications, which report data from the respective national statistical agencies, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). These are complemented by information from the OECD, the ABS, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and other national and international organisations. A full list of references appears at the end of the document.

Data concerning deaths, as presented in chapter five, are classified according to the Ninth Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-9), produced by WHO. The main purpose of the ICD is to produce nationally and internationally consistent information on causes of death.

To adjust for the effects of different population structures between countries and changing population age structures within countries over time, deaths data have been age-standardised to the World Standard Population.

Structure of the report

Each indicator appears on a double page and usually consists of:

- time series and most recently available data for comparison countries, along with a measure of change over time, shown in tables with a constant order of countries;
- several paragraphs of commentary analysing the data and Australia's standing in an international context;
- a series of graphs showing countries in rank order, locating Australia among other comparison countries for most recent data and change over time, along with trends and age-specific data where appropriate; and
- a list of one or more references to more detailed publications.

