

## CHAPTER 4

# A healthy improvement?

## Satisfaction with the NHS under Labour

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This chapter examines satisfaction with the NHS, and how it has varied over time and between different groups.

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### Satisfaction with the NHS is at its highest level ever.

- When Labour entered office in 1997, only a third of people (34%) were satisfied with the NHS, the lowest levels since our survey series began in 1983. By 2009, satisfaction stood at 64%, the highest level since the survey began.
- Only one in five people (19%) are “very dissatisfied” or “quite dissatisfied” with the NHS, down 31 percentage points since 1997 (when 50% were dissatisfied).

### Satisfaction levels have increased across the population.

- The largest increases have been among those with traditionally low levels of satisfaction. These include 18-34 year olds (up 32 percentage points since 1996, compared with an increase of 24 points among those aged 65 and over) and better-off households in the top two income quartiles (up 31 and 36 percentage points respectively since 1996, compared with an increase of 25 points among the lowest income quartile).
- While satisfaction with the NHS among Conservative supporters fell initially when Labour came to power, it rose 12 percentage points between 1996 and 2009, reaching a high of 61% in 2009.

Increased satisfaction partly reflects the fact that people recognise and value the improvements that have taken place within the NHS, particularly in relation to waiting times. But the promotion of patient choice (within England at least) has not led to higher levels of satisfaction with NHS services.

### Satisfaction levels differ considerably by service.

- Satisfaction with **GPs** is traditionally high. Although levels declined after 1993, they recovered in 2005, standing at 80% in 2009, possibly mirroring the introduction of maximum waiting time targets for appointments.
- Satisfaction with **dentists** steadily declined since 1983, halting only in 2004 since when satisfaction levels have remained stable. In 2009 less than half of people (48%) were satisfied with NHS dentists.
- Satisfaction with **outpatient services** is at its highest ever (67%). Outpatient services have seen the biggest increase in satisfaction levels, with a 15 point increase between 1996 and 2009.
- Increases in satisfaction levels with **inpatient services** only really began in 2006, and reached 59% in 2009.



**John Appleby, co-author, comments:**

“The new government’s health policy (in England) is now laying even greater emphasis on patient choice and more disaggregated purchasing of care by GPs as the main mechanisms for improving the NHS, but against a virtual zero real growth in funding for the next four years and the rejection (at least overtly) of the target regime that has been instrumental in improving waiting times. If these policies fail to deliver improvements in the things the public cares about it will be hard to see a continuation in these upward trends in satisfaction with the NHS.”

