

Public depressed by state of the health service

By Nigel Hawkes
Health Editor

THE public remains pessimistic about the National Health Service, according to a poll that compares attitudes in eight European countries.

Of the eight, Britain has by far the largest gap between what it expects and what it gets from the health service and a large majority believe that healthcare systems elsewhere in Europe are better. Only the Czech Republic and Italy have a greater sense of inferiority than Britain.

The most striking difference, however, is in what people rate as important in a healthcare system. Despite years of claiming that equality of access is the defining feature of the NHS, British people rate this quality lower than do those in any of the other seven.

The polls were undertaken by Populus for the Stockholm Network, an organisation that supplies services to think-tanks throughout Europe. In each country — Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the Czech Republic — 1,000 people were interviewed.

The full results, published in a report called *Impatient for Change*, show that Europeans are pessimistic about the future of healthcare. More than four fifths (81 per cent) believe that the quality of healthcare will decline in the next ten years without reform, while 84 per cent believe that change is necessary or urgent.

The most worrying aspect of the poll for the Government is the gap between aspiration and reality in the NHS. Respondents were asked to rate five characteristics of

healthcare systems, and how well their own system delivered them.

The five were time between diagnosis and treatment; being treated at a time and place to suit you; being treated with the latest medicines or techniques; having enough information to make an informed choice; and being treated by a doctor of your own choice.

In Britain, 98 per cent rated the time between diagnosis and treatment important, but only 18 per cent thought that the NHS performance in delivering it was good. The gap between the two figures — the “delivery deficit” — is 80.

Over all five measures, the UK delivery deficit is 63, the worst of the eight — 12 points below the European average and six below the next lowest-ranking country, Italy.

On access to the latest medicines, no country rates it higher than Britain, nor rates the actual performance lower. And only 25 per cent rate the NHS good on convenience again the lowest of the eight countries polled.

The polls were carried out early in 2004, and provide little evidence of a burgeoning confidence in the NHS among the British people polled. While 60 per cent expect the NHS to get worse in the next decade, only 17 per cent expect it to get better.

The only consolation is that such gloom is echoed in the other seven. “Whether we like it or not, Europe’s health systems are no longer sustainable and will have to be overhauled,” said Helen Disney, director of the Stockholm Network. Politicians would be punished by impatient citizens if changes were not introduced.