

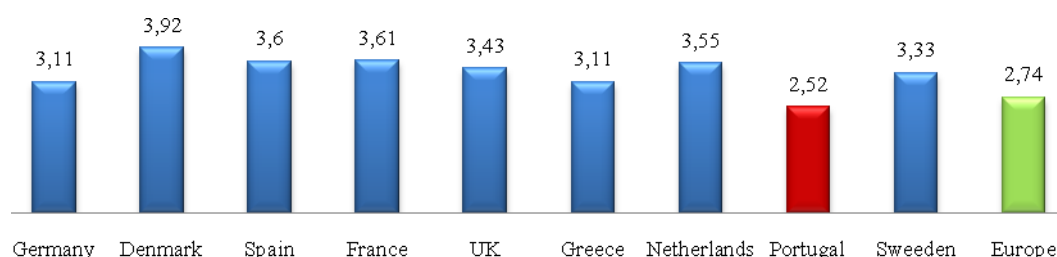
Health care and patient compliance in Portugal and Europe

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The European Social Survey (ESS) collects data regularly on different social dimensions in most European countries. In 2004, special attention was given to health care. We will present some data from Portugal and compare them with 8 other countries with different scores in the Human Development Index, different national health systems, and different socio-historical environments (Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands; France, Germany and the United Kingdom; Portugal, Spain and Greece), as well with the global average of the 24 countries covered by this survey.

Health system's evaluation – In 2004, the average Portuguese adult was somewhat “dissatisfied” (2,52 on a scale 1-5) with the health services' performance, regardless of gender, age, educational level or social class. Comparing with the other countries, the Portuguese are the less satisfied, coming close however to the European average (2.74). The Danish were the most satisfied with their NHS, followed by the French, the Spanish, the Dutch, the British, the Germans and the Greeks. These results point out to the fact that the health systems' evaluation does not depend only on its objective performance, but also on several other factors not always easy to measure. Indeed, the comparative assessment of health systems is always difficult to perform, as it depends on the level of development of the country's health system and its historical and political context, as well as people's expectations. Furthermore, it depends on personal experience of the way the health system works and, when the respondents have no such experience, assessments depend heavily on the public opinion climate prevailing in the country when the study is undertaken. When we compared the assessment of the Portuguese NHS with that of other national systems like education, democracy, the economy or the government's performance, the correlation between them is high. Actually, in Portugal the health system received one of the highest ratings, second only to education, which tends to show that the health system is assessed more in political terms than in terms of the objective quality of the health care provided.

Figure 1: Distribution of averages concerning the health system's assessment by country (and in Europe)
(1 - Not satisfied at all; 5 - Very satisfied)



Health status, visits to the doctor and expenditure on medicines – On average, the Portuguese assess their health condition somewhat negatively (average 2.57 in a scale 1-5). Men declare lower levels of morbidity than women, as do people under 44 years-old, higher levels of education and socio-economic status; conversely, people aged 60 or more, with a primary school degree or less and manual workers assess their health more negatively. Comparing with other countries, the Portuguese are, on average, those who declare to be in worse health condition; in Europe in general respondents consider their health to be good (3,69). On average, the Portuguese went to see a doctor between three and five times in the last year, and less than half of them (43%) said they were taking one or more medicines prescribed by a doctor. However, although the Portuguese reported a lower health condition than the other Europeans, the average number of visits to the doctor is not higher than in the rest of Europe (2,6); similarly, they do not report to buy more medicines than their European counterparts, and are within the European average (42,2%).

A large majority of the Portuguese (93,4%) declared to comply with all the doctor's instructions when a medicine is prescribed to them; only 4,8% admitted to have taken the medicine, but without complying fully with the doctor's instructions. Very few are those who buy a medicine but end up not taking it (1%) or those who do not buy it (0,8%). The Portuguese, together with the Greeks and the Dutch, are those who said to comply more strictly with medical orientations, scoring significantly higher than the European average (80,9%). These results are an indication of the high prevalence of respondents whose answers about compliance tell us more about the internalization of the social norm that «medicines are to be taken according to the doctor's instructions» than about their real behaviour. Thus, compliance needs to be studied more thoroughly, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as sharper conceptual tools, in order to analyse the issues involved in patient compliance in Portugal and in most European countries.

March 2008