

*In brief*

**Many ambulance journeys are unnecessary:** Half of all ambulance journeys to hospitals are unnecessary because patients could be treated at home or at the site of the injury, says a report from the NHS Confederation. See *NHS Ambulance Services... More Than Just Patient Transport* at [www.nhsconfed.org](http://www.nhsconfed.org).

**Australian government to cover cancer treatment costs:** Australians who took part in British nuclear tests in the outback between 1952-63 will get free treatment for any cancer. The federal government said that it would cover costs not covered by the public health system.

**Developing world will carry cancer burden:** By 2020, the number of new cases of cancer worldwide will increase to more than 15 million, with deaths increasing to 12 million, and much of the burden will be in the developing world (*Annals of Oncology* 2006;17(suppl 8):S15-23).

**Germany faces more strikes:** Hospital doctors in three German states began indefinite strikes last week to press for wage increases and better working conditions. It follows three months of strikes by doctors in university hospitals, leading to a 16% settlement (*BMJ* 2006;332:1472, 24 Jun).

**Netherlands drops out of healthy nation position:** The Netherlands has lost its top five position among Europe's healthiest countries, says a report from the Dutch Institute for Public Health. The proportion of overweight teenagers has doubled in some groups since 1997; rates of weekend binge drinking are second only to Ireland; and 45% of teenage boys and 36% of girls smoke ([www.rivm.nl](http://www.rivm.nl)).

**Airlines cautioned on tuberculosis risk:** The World Health Organization has issued new protocols to reduce the risk of disease transmission on flights. The guidelines stipulate that people with infectious tuberculosis must postpone long distance travel, while those with multidrug resistant strains must postpone any air travel ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)).

# Health spending rising faster than GDP in most rich countries

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Health spending has grown faster than gross domestic product in every country of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) except Finland in the past 15 years, new statistics show.

The *OECD Health Data 2006*, which was released by the international Paris based organisation at the end of June, is a comprehensive database of comparable health statistics with more than 1200 indicators for rich countries.

The data show that health spending across OECD countries averaged 7% of gross domestic product in 1990, but had climbed to 8.9% by 2004. Presenting the findings, the

organisation warned that if current trends continue and the level of health care was to be maintained, governments would either have to raise taxes, cut spending in other areas, or make the public pay more from their own pockets.

The United States emerges as the country with the highest share of gross domestic product devoted to health—15.3%, up from 12% in 1990—although the bulk of this comes from the private, not public, purse. In second place comes Switzerland with 11.6%.

Among European Union countries, Germany devotes the most with 10.9% followed by France (10.5%) and Belgium

(10.1%). The United Kingdom allocates 8.3%, the same as Hungary, and narrowly ahead of Spain (8.1%) and Japan (8%).

In most OECD members, the bulk of healthcare costs are financed through taxes. Throughout the whole zone, the average is 73%, but it is nearer 90% in Luxembourg, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia and about 85% in the UK, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway.

However, the proportion of health funding coming out of public, as opposed to private, funds has been reduced in countries that previously had a relatively high level—Poland (by 23.1%), Hungary (16.6%), and the Czech Republic (8.2%). In contrast, it increased in Korea (by 12.9%), Turkey (11.1%), Ireland (7.6%), and the UK (1.9%).

The report, *OECD Health Data 2006*, is available at [www.oecdbookshop.org](http://www.oecdbookshop.org).

