

The *Harris Poll*

THE HARRIS POLL 1996 #12
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FUTURE OF HEALTH CARE: PUBLIC OPTIMISTIC ABOUT QUALITY AND CHOICE BUT PESSIMISTIC ABOUT COSTS AND INSURANCE COVERAGE

Overall, large majority still highly critical of health care system.

by Humphrey Taylor

As the managed care revolution continues to transform the nation's health care system, and as President Clinton and the Republican-controlled Congress continue to disagree about the future of Medicare and Medicaid, the public's expectations for the future of health care are a mixture of guarded optimism and pessimism.

A modest 54%-42% majority of the public expects that the quality of the care they and their families receive will improve in the next three years. One reason may be their strong belief that they will continue to benefit from the fruits of medical research with new drugs and new medical technology.

A modest 52%-42% majority is also optimistic that their ability to choose a good doctor will improve. This may be somewhat surprising given the rapid trend toward managed care which, by definition, gives people less choice than traditional fee-for-service health insurance plans.

In stark contrast to this public optimism about quality and choice, most people are pessimistic -- and many people are very pessimistic -- about what will happen to health care costs and insurance coverage.

A 71%-29% majority of the public believe the number of people without health insurance will get worse, and 34% believe it will get much worse. This would be a continuation of the current trend, with growing numbers of people having no insurance. Many experts believe this to be probable as companies hire more uninsured workers and trim benefits for retirees and dependents.

Even larger majorities are pessimistic about costs. Three-to-one majorities believe that the total cost of health care to the nation, and their own out-of-pocket cost will get worse. Over a quarter believe costs will get much worse.

These are all the results of a Harris Poll of 1,005 adults surveyed between January 18th and 22nd.

One question in this survey measures overall attitudes to the health care system and measures changes since 1982. During these last fourteen years, the numbers have varied as hopes and fears rose and fell. However, the big picture has not changed very much. The great majority of Americans have always expressed their dissatisfaction with the nation's health care system, and they still do. Only 16% of the public believe the system "works pretty well"; a quarter (24%) believe we need to "completely rebuild" it; most people (59%) believe that "there are some good things in our health care system but fundamental changes are needed to make it work better".

Humphrey Taylor is the Chairman and CEO of Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

TABLE 1

EXPECTATIONS FOR CHOICE, QUALITY, UNINSURANCE, AND COST FOR NEXT THREE YEARS

"Over the next three years, do you think (READ EACH ITEM) will get much better, somewhat better, somewhat worse or much worse?"

	Much Better %	Some-what Better %	Some-what Worse %	Much Worse %	No Change %	Not Sure %	Better %	Worse %
Your ability to choose a good doctor	11	41	31	11	4	2	52	42
The quality of health care provided to you and your family	8	46	31	11	4	1	54	42
The number of people without health insurance	4	25	37	34	1	1	29	71
The total cost of health care to the nation	3	23	43	30	*	*	26	73
The cost of health care to you and your family	3	23	44	28	1	1	26	72

TABLE 2
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE U.S. HEALTH CARE SYSTEM
1982 - 1994

"Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing your overall view of the country's health care system?"

	1982	1983	1984	1987	1988	1990	1991	1993	April	June	Sept.	Jan.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	1994	1994	1994	1996
On the whole, the health care system works pretty well and only minor changes are necessary to make it work better	19	21	26	29	10	16	6	13	14	18	20	16
There are some good things in our health care system, but fundamental changes are needed to make it work better	47	50	49	47	60	59	50	49	54	53	44	59
Our health care system has so much wrong with it that we need to completely rebuild it	28	25	21	19	29	24	42	35	31	28	35	24
Not sure	6	4	4	5	1	1	2	3	1	2	2	1

METHODOLOGY

This Harris Poll was conducted by telephone within the United States between January 18 and January 22, among a nationwide cross section of 1,005 adults. Figures for age, sex, race, education and number of adults in household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

In theory, with a sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a statistical precision of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is difficult or impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

This statement conforms to the principles of disclosure of National Council on Public Polls.

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Contact Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Information Services, 111 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003, (212) 539-9697, for complete demographic details for the questions in this release.

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