

US health system ranks last compared to other countries: studies  
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The US health care system ranks last among other major rich countries for quality, access and efficiency, according to two studies released Tuesday by a health care think tank.

The studies by the Commonwealth Fund found that the United States, which has the most expensive health system in the world, underperforms consistently relative to other countries and differs most notably in the fact that Americans have no universal health insurance coverage.

"The United States stands out as the only nation in these studies that does not ensure access to health care through universal coverage and promotion of a 'medical home' for patients," said Commonwealth Fund president Karen Davis.

"Our failure to ensure health insurance for all and encourage stable, long-term ties between physicians and patients shows in our poor performance on measures of quality, access, efficiency, equity, and health outcomes."

In "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: An International Update on the Comparative Performance of American Health Care", the study focused on interviews with physicians and patients in Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the United States who were asked to speak about their experiences and views on their health systems.

The US ranked last in most areas, including access to health care, patient safety, timeliness of care, efficiency and equity. Americans were also last in terms of whether they had a regular physician.

"The US spends twice what the average industrialized country spends on health care but we're clearly not getting value for the money," Davis told AFP.

She also noted that 45 million Americans, or 15 percent of the US population, have no health insurance, which contributes to the country's medical woes.

The United States is also far behind in adopting modern health information technology, which translates into spiralling costs and poor care.

"We pride ourselves on being advanced on so many areas of technology but it's not the case on health information technology," Davis said. "Other countries have just moved ahead."

Britain got the top score in overall ranking among the countries in the study, followed by Germany. New Zealand and Australia tied for third followed by Canada and the United States.

The second study delves into why health costs in the United States are so much higher than in

eight other countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development: Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

The study, "Multinational Comparisons of Health Systems Data," found that even though the US spends the most on publicly and privately financed health insurance, its citizens had the most potential years of life lost due to circulatory and respiratory diseases as well as diabetes.

"This study blows a lot of myths about the US health system," Davis said. "We spend three times what the average country spends on a day of hospital care and we also spend twice what the average country spends on prescription medication."

Health care is likely to be a prominent issue in the 2008 US presidential elections with various candidates already promising to tackle rising costs and the burden placed on big business to provide health insurance.