

# Atlas of Healthcare Variation

## Questions and Answers

### 1. What is the Atlas of Healthcare Variation?

The Atlas of Healthcare Variation shows variation in the health care received by people in different geographical regions. Similar atlases have been developed by other countries. The New Zealand Atlas aims to stimulate debate by highlighting variation, rather than making judgements about why this variation exists or whether it is appropriate. Our belief is that this debate will then lead to improvements in health care services.

### 2. How is the variation presented?

- Via easy-to-use maps, graphs, tables and commentary on the Health Quality & Safety Commission's website ([www.hqsc.govt.nz](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz))
- These highlight variations by geographic area in:
  - the provision and use of specific health services
  - health outcomes.

### 3. Who is the audience for the Atlas?

- Senior clinicians and health managers (eg, CEOs, CMOs, COOs, DONs, DAHs, quality & risk managers) across the health and disability sector (public and private)
- Primary care clinicians and managers
- Professional bodies
- NGOs
- Consumers / patients / the public
- Government agencies and sector bodies with an interest in health care variation.

### 4. What questions might the Atlas stimulate?

- Does the variation matter?
- Do some patients receive a poorer service than others?
- Are we doing things the same way as in other parts of the country?
- Do we need to change what we are doing?
- Can we learn from successful innovations or best practice guidelines elsewhere or share our expertise?

### 5. What areas are included in the Atlas?

The first release includes the recent maternity quality indicators<sup>1</sup> as well as contextual demographic information for each District Health Board region such as life expectancy, proportion of populations in standard age groups, ethnicity and levels of deprivation. A set of indicators related to selected surgical procedures will be added shortly. The next release is due for September and will include measures relevant to primary care, such as cardiovascular disease management, gout management and polypharmacy in the elderly.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health New Zealand Maternity Clinical Indicators 2009: Revised June 2012

6. How did you select the subjects in the Atlas?

The subjects in the Atlas were chosen by a group of clinical experts and consumers based on clear criteria regarding the importance of the area and the likelihood there was unexplained variation in services.

7. What score is ideal?

We have no a-priori position on the 'ideal' rate for any given indicator. What is important and interesting in the Atlas is that it will promote discussion about the reasons for the variation between geographic areas. Without discussion, we cannot conclude that a 'low' score is 'better' than a high one, nor is it the case that 'average' scores are necessarily the right ones.

8. Why does variation occur?

Variation occurs for a number of reasons. There will always be some variation because:

- health systems are complex
- it may be appropriate to achieve equitable health outcomes for different populations with different needs
- regional differences may arise in measuring or recording information – not from actual variation in performance.

However, some variation cannot be explained by the characteristics of the people being treated. This is sometimes known as 'unwarranted variation'.

9. How will the Atlas lead to actual change?

Persistent unwarranted variation in health care affects equity of access to health care. The Atlas will highlight areas where people have less access to services than people in other regions, and stimulate questions and debate about the health care needed by people in those areas. It is hoped the Atlas will support health care provision that meets the real needs of all people throughout the country.

10. Are these league tables?

No. The Atlas does not seek to make judgements on practice; no one score is necessarily better than another and some variation might be warranted. The goal is to highlight variation.

11. What doesn't the Atlas show?

- It only displays variations that exist - it doesn't **explain** the reasons for variation.
- It doesn't suggest an **ideal** level (the average is not necessarily the ideal).
- This means it should not be used in isolation as a tool for **judging the performance** of one geographic area against another.