

## Monitor 2007-2008 Supplementary Report on Medical Trust

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A comparison of the 2007 and 2008 Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor survey results showed a small but statistically significant decline in Australians' levels of trust in their doctors and hospitals. This waning public confidence is consistent with research showing community concern about our under-resourced health care system (Hardie & Critchley, 2008).

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor is an annual national survey of 1000 Australians which provides a 'snapshot' of community views on science and technology. In 2007 the Monitor focussed on medical trust, examining community trust in general practitioners (GPs), medical specialists and hospitals. Australians reported very high levels of trust in their own GP (average trust rating 4.13 on a 0 to 5 scale, where 0 = no trust and 5 = a great deal of trust). They reported moderate, but significantly lower trust in medical specialists (average rating 3.83). Trust in hospitals was moderately low (rating 3.59), and significantly lower than trust in doctors (see Monitor 2007 for full report).

We were intrigued by the relatively lower trust ratings for hospitals compared to medical practitioners, so later in 2007 we conducted an additional, more detailed study of medical trust and attitudes to public and private health care systems (Hardie & Critchley, 2008). That survey, based on a representative sample of 800 Australians, found trust ratings for medical professionals which were identical to the 2007 Monitor results (GP rating 4.13, specialists 3.83). Similarly, trust in private hospitals (3.58) virtually matched the 2007 Monitor result, but trust in public hospitals was found to be significantly lower (average rating 3.18). That research suggested that Australians trusted medical professionals, but were concerned about the public hospital system. Indeed, most people reported low levels of trust in private health insurers and did not favour a private, user-pays health care system. The majority favoured universal, government-funded health care and were willing to pay higher taxes to support improvements to the public health system (see Hardie & Critchley, 2008; 2009).

In the 2008 Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor survey there appeared to be an overall decline in medical trust (see 2008 Monitor for full report). The 2008 sample reported only moderately strong trust in doctors (average rating 3.73) and moderate trust in hospitals (average rating 3.48). A statistical comparison of the 2007 and 2008 data showed that the most recent results were significantly lower than the previous year for both doctors and hospitals.

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor data documents a decline in medical trust between 2007 and 2008, but cannot provide an explanation for this decline. Perhaps community concerns about the health care system, particularly public hospitals, are beginning to undermine trust in the medical professionals who work within that system. Further research may elucidate the reasons behind this waning public confidence. Action is clearly needed to ensure that public trust in Australia's under-resourced health care system does not continue to decline.

### REFERENCES

Hardie, E.A. & Critchley, C.R. (2009). Public perceptions of Australia's doctors, hospitals and health care systems. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 190 (2), 103.

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