

Ten Achievements for 35 years of the Portuguese National Health Service (1979 - 2015): Looking Back, Planning the Future



Dez Conquistas nos 35 anos do Serviço Nacional de Saúde Português (1979 - 2015): Pensar Passado e Projetar Futuro

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Palavras-chave: Esperança de Vida; Estatísticas Vitais; Mortalidade Infantil; Portugal; Serviço Nacional de Saúde.

This manuscript follows Antonio Arnaut's interview which was published in the Acta Médica Portuguesa, entitled "*Serviço Nacional de Saúde: Sonho ou Realidade*" ('National Health Service: Dream or Reality'). We aimed to complement his perspective with comparable data showing the impact that his mentoring of the *Serviço Nacional de Saúde (SNS)* had on national health. In the words of its 'founding father', Antonio Arnaut (Fig. 1), the *Serviço Nacional de Saúde* is currently described as 'an essential factor to human dignity and social cohesion' as well as 'solidarity in action'.¹

Thirty-five years after its foundation, what does the SNS have to say about itself? Which were its achievements? How did it change the nation's health? Which challenges does it have to face?

We aimed to summarize the performance of the SNS regarding 10 of its major achievements with regard to strict objective values and realized it was a clearly reductive and incomplete exercise unable to measure the social, human and immaterial dimension that it represents to the Portuguese population. However, it is still a necessary and doubly important exercise, either as a reflection of the date we celebrate today, or driven by current circumstances, as the SNS is put to test due to economical, ideological and political challenges our country is currently facing.

When observing the SNS, we cannot fail to mention the transforming role that it had in the Future, now the Present, of Portugal. There definitely is a Portugal post-SNS, in which healthcare became a Universal Right rather than a privilege for some, where healthcare had an integrated organization and most importantly where the Portuguese patient became the State's concern.

The ten achievements that we analysed may be summarized under 3 major principles – maternal and child health, the perspective of the Portuguese people regarding the SNS and medical coverage. As regards maternal and child health, the reduction in child and maternal mortality rates, associated to the increase in life expectancy at birth, the increase in the coverage by the National Immunization Program (*Programa Nacional de Vacinação (PNV)*) and in the number of immunized children, are real banners of the SNS, even internationally. As regards the perspective of the Portuguese towards the SNS, we find that most Portuguese people acknowledge its essential role in national health improvement. Finally, regarding medical coverage, we find an increase in the number of physicians working for the SNS with the corresponding increase in the number of doctors per capita, one of the highest in OECD, which constitutes, together with a higher number of doctor's consultations, a hallmark of the revolution in healthcare due to the creation of the SNS.

Much work remains undone: about 1 million Portuguese people have no family doctor currently assigned, the frauds within the SNS regarding medical prescriptions and reimbursed medication are still a reality,² waiting times in Emergencies and the waiting lists for certain medical procedures within the SNS, like for instance colonoscopies, remain excessive.³ Also in health literacy there is still a long way ahead. As it is proven that its improvement has an impact in patient's knowledge and behaviours, the actions such as the protocol involving the *Instituto Nacional de Emergência Médica (INEM)* and schools for training in basic life support should be valued and extended to other groups and sectors in society.⁴

António Arnaut

Born in 28 January 1936 at Cumieira, Penela (Coimbra). Lawyer, politician, founder of the Socialist Party, poet, essayist, novelist, member of the *Conselho Superior da Magistratura*, President of the Coimbra District Council (*Conselho Distrital de Coimbra*) of the Portuguese Bar Association (*Ordem dos Advogados*), Deputy, Gran Master of the Grand Orient (*Grão-mestre do Grande Oriente Lusitano*) and having received distinguished and relevant tributes and rewards. He is the author of the Regulation that set up the National Health Service (*Serviço Nacional de Saúde*) (Law 56/79, from 15th September) as Social Affairs Minister of the II Constitutional Government.

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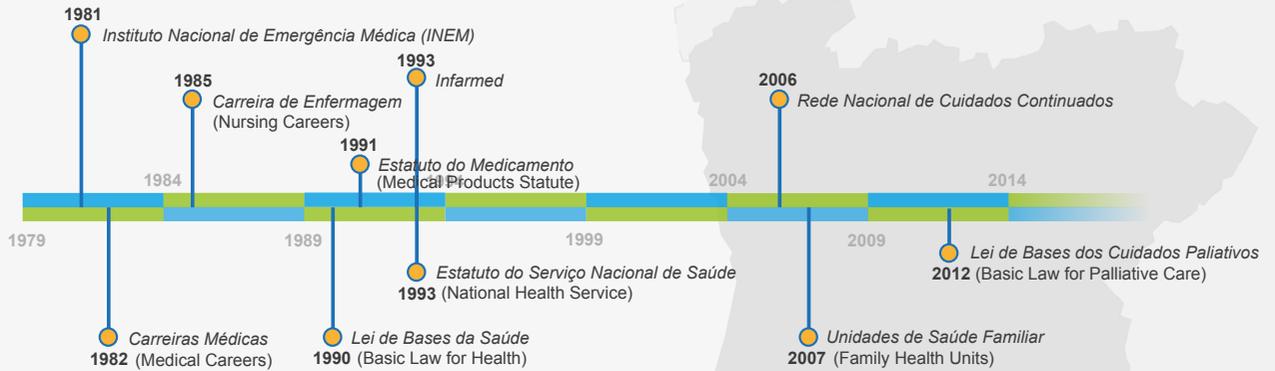
2. Editor Associado. Acta Médica Portuguesa. Lisboa. Portugal.

3. Editor-Chefe. Acta Médica Portuguesa. Lisboa. Portugal.

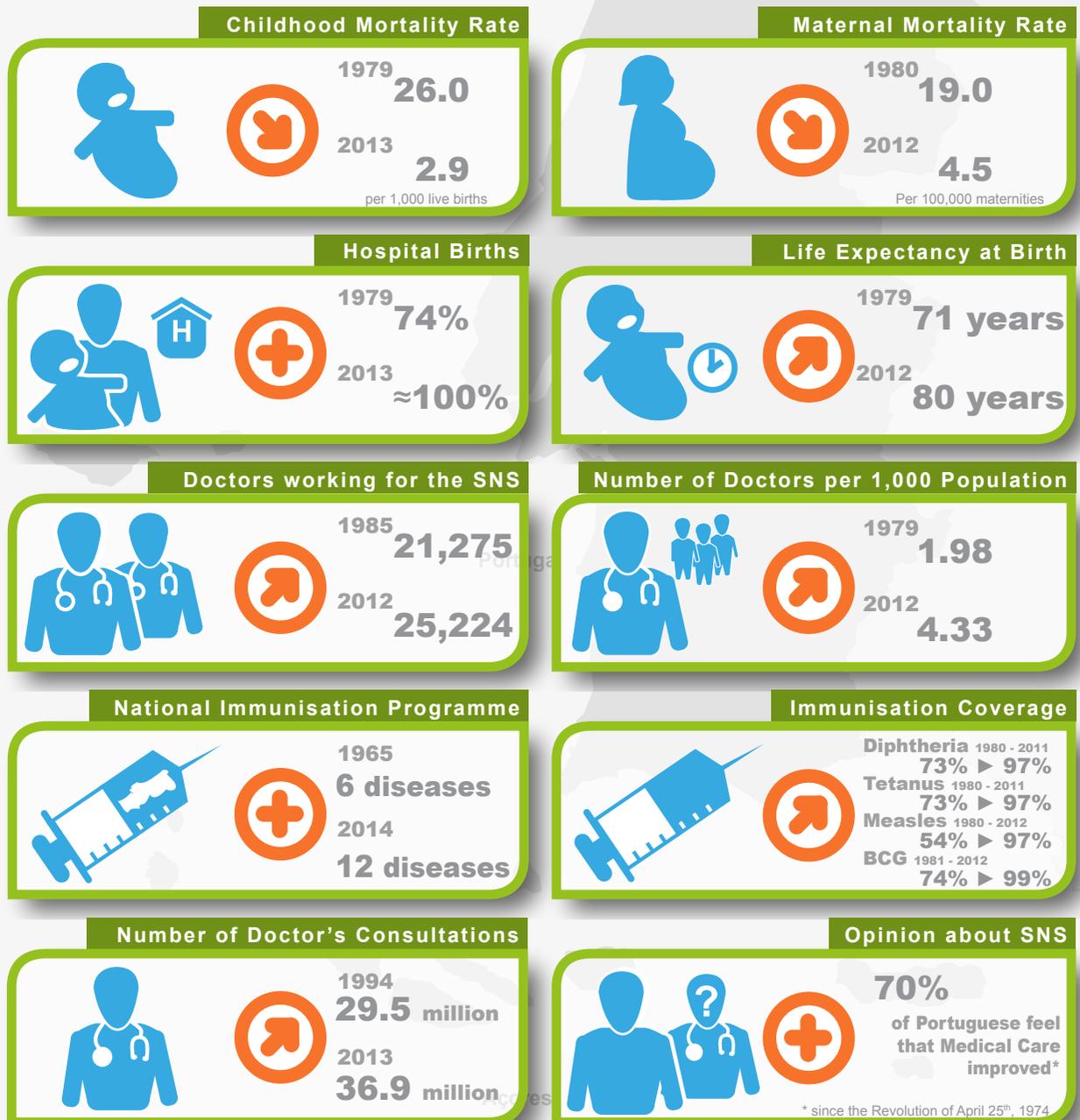
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Portuguese SNS: important dates



SNS achievements



Data: PORDATA, CISD and DGS. Study "40 ANOS DO 25 DE ABRIL" promoted by ICS-UL.

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A reflection of the SNS should include the Past but focus on 'thinking about the Future'. When analysing the study charged by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to a team of national and international prominent personalities led by Lord Nigel Crisp, 'A Future to Health: we all have a role' (*"Um Futuro para a Saúde: todos temos um papel a desempenhar"*), it is possible to attribute a plastic dimension to the SNS and to view it as a dynamic achievement in permanent construction. This report suggests a new path for Health in Portugal, 'person-centred and based on a paradigm, in which citizens are partners in health promotion and healthcare'. As such there is an urgent need to build a social pact concerning a "national asset" called health,

in which all of us (ordinary citizens, health professionals, teachers, businessmen, municipalities and Government) will play a specific role. Reducing the incidence of hospital infections, preventing diabetes prevalence from growth and contributing to the country's leadership in early childhood - the three major challenges in this report - are only examples of the intense demographic and epidemiological transition and of the many obstacles that the SNS will have to face in the future.⁴

We hope that this analysis will not remain in the Present, but rather evolve to the Future: our future as individuals and the future of the most challenging collective achievement that we could ever meet - our *Serviço Nacional de Saúde*.

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Figure 1 - António Arnaut, the Mondego River and the beautiful city of Coimbra

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