Does Scotland deserve its reputation as the ‘Sick Man of Europe’? *It depends what you mean by Europe.*

(But the answer’s probably ‘yes’)

**The term ‘Sick Man of Europe’** was first used in 1853 to describe the Ottoman Empire. In the decades since, this epithet has been applied to many European nations, including France, Greece, Germany, Finland, and Italy. However, despite the use of the word ‘sick’, most of these designations have been made on grounds of lacklustre economic performance, rather than public health. The (more appropriate) application of the term to Scotland has been used largely by epidemiologists to refer to the *relative mortality/morbidity disadvantage* faced by Scottish populations compared, mainly, with our *Western European* neighbours.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Life expectancy in Scotland** lags behind our nearest neighbours; we should expect to live longer than we do given how wealthy we are. But comparison with the rest of Europe as a whole shows a more complex picture. **Though life expectancies (below) in Scotland** have fallen below those in Western and Northern Europe, they remain above those in Eastern Europe. The improvements in Southern European life expectancies have been remarkable. |  |

**The figure above-right** compares mortality risks in Scotland with the rest of Europe, for each age in single years and each year from 1950. Reds show higher risks in Scotland; darker shades show bigger differences. The diagonal lines indicate different birth cohorts. Scotland’s mortality risks were higher than those of Eastern Europe for cohorts born before 1920, for example, but for all later cohorts have been lower. **Compared with Southern Europe**, mortality risks tended to be higher in Scotland from around age 40 onwards. **Since 2000**, relative risks from age 30 to 40 are particularly high, leading to a new dark red ‘hotspot’, and cause of concern, especially if relatively higher risks persist into older ages. **Further Reading:** Visualising & quantifying ‘excess deaths’: http://jech.bmj.com/content/71/5/461