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Do Doctors Work?

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One of the interesting things about being a researcher is that one can think and say the unthinkable. That is presumably what we are for -- to ask ourselves, and society, questions that might upset people and preconceptions.

Here is one.

Did you know that, if you look across rich countries, there is no link at all between the number of doctors per head and the length of life-span? Nil. Zip. On the economics of health, therefore, it is time to start raising issues that nobody wants to confront.

According to conventional wisdom, you cannot have too much health care. Public attitudes in Europe are unquestioningly in favour of ever more spending. Taxpayers always want larger numbers of physicians. But health care is extraordinarily expensive, and there is no such thing as a free hospital lunch.

If we look at people who were born in the early 1970s, we find that projected life expectancy for that cohort is about 72 years. Longevity has gone up a bit since then; for those born in 2001, life expectancy will be about 77. This is among the well-off countries, or in other words, for the top-25 richest nations in the world.

Yet say we start to look within those twenty five countries. It turns out that average life-span varies amazingly little from one place to another. For those born in the 1970s, it was best to pop out with a Swedish passport. That nation's life expectancy was 74.7 years. It was worst -- if you had to be a baby in the industrial western countries in that era -- to arrive as an Austrian. Life expectancy was 70.6 years. As an American you could look forward to 71.5 years; as a German 71 years; in France, 72.4 years. Of course most of these people born in the nineteen seventies are still going strong, so much

of this is demographers' forecasting, based on previous data, but the demographers are pretty accurate at this, and the general message is clear. Your nationality hardly matters at all.

Yet for those in favour of lots more health spending, the worrying thing is that the number of doctors varies absolutely enormously across these nations. Italy has the largest number of physicians per head of any place on the planet (this is probably one of the world's less well-known facts). There are 550 Italian doctors for every one hundred thousand Italian citizens. Life expectancy, however, is a very average 72.1 years.

At the other end of the distribution, among wealthy countries, comes Great Britain. My nation is way down -- often to national despair in the newspapers. For us, there are only 160 doctors per head. Sounds worryingly low, doesn't it? We must surely be suffering compared to Italy.

The facts then come as a surprise. Life expectancy in Britain -- again looking at the cohort born in the nineteen seventies, though the general point goes through regardless of which cohort is examined -- is 72 years. This is effectively identical to Italy, which has more than three times as many doctors.

Belgium and Switzerland also have lots of physicians: 400 per head and 320 per head. Life expectancies there are 71.4 years and 73.8 years. Like Britain, countries such as Ireland and Japan have relatively few doctors, at only about 200 physicians for every one hundred thousand people in the population. But the Irish and Japanese have virtually identical life-spans to the Belgians and Swiss.

Most people think of Japan as a very long-lived country. There is some truth to that in modern data. For children born today in Japan, expected life-span is just over 80. Maybe it is the fish diet, some say. Mind you, if you worry a lot about being a smoker -- I am not one but I do like to drive fast and sometimes get tired of others telling folk what to do with their lives -- you may like to know that Japan and Switzerland have the highest ratio of smokers in the advanced world.

It is likely that many medical experts would object to the line of argument proposed here. They might point to the dramatic improvement in length of life that we have seen, in our kinds of countries, over the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the improvement in life spans may just be because of better food, drugs and technology. That is not the same as more doctors.

There is, interestingly, a strong parallel between economics and medicine. Human beings, like national economies, seem to have strong self-stabilising properties. In other words, when they become ill, they tend to recover if left alone. Occasionally things go badly wrong, and it is necessary then to give nature a bit of help, but not often. Intervention may mostly do as much harm as it does good.

Although it is not easy to know what to make of the facts in this article, they are not easily forgotten once known. They make me question the need for more health care. They make me doubt that doctors are as good for us as supposed. They make me think maybe I should spend my money on a faster car, and take my chances with the self-righting mechanism called the human body.

The data in this article are taken from [The Human Development Report](#), 2001, published by the United Nations.