

Factors Associated with Health Services Utilization

A Population-based Study Assessing the Characteristics of People that Visit

Doctors in Southern Brazil

Raul Mendoza Sassi

ABSTRACT

Objectives: To analyze: a) the factors that lead persons to visit a doctor; b) their relative importance; and c) the equity of the system. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study with 1,285 persons aged 15 or more was carried out between January and May 2000 in Rio Grande, Brazil. Demographic, socioeconomic, psychological, health need and regular source of care data were collected. The outcome was visit to a doctor within the previous two months. A hierarchical model approach was used, and data were analyzed using Poisson regression. Adjusted prevalence ratios and 95% confidence intervals were calculated.

Results: Health needs measured as self-reported health was the most important factor. The probability of visiting a doctor was 30% for persons reporting excellent health, compared to those with poor or regular health. Having a regular doctor improved the likelihood of utilizing health services by 74%. Analysis according to the highest level of need showed that the lowest un-educated socioeconomic group made 62% fewer doctor visits. However, a significant interaction was found between income and education, and each year of schooling increased the likelihood of the outcome by 15%. This probability also improved with a regular source of care and/or a health insurance. **Conclusions:** Health need and regular source of care were the most important factors associated with visiting a doctor. Years of education modified the prevalence rates of visit to a doctor in the lowest income group. Specific measures reinforcing the importance of having a regular doctor and/or explaining the health-system structure may improve access for the underserved.

Key words: Health Services – Accessibility – Utilization – Equity – Continuity of patient care

Prevalence of having a regular doctor and associated factors: A population-based study in southern Brazil

Raul Mendoza Sassi

ABSTRACT

Background: There is little information in Brazil on the characteristics of people with a regular doctor and its consequences. The purpose of this study is to assess its prevalence, associated factors, and its effects on health services utilization.

Methods: Data was obtained from a cross-sectional study carried out in Rio Grande, Brazil, between January and May 2000, by interviewing 1260 persons aged 15 or more. Poisson regression models were used to analyze the relationships; variables were introduced following a hierarchical model. Adjusted prevalence ratios (PR) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were calculated. **Results:** The study found a 37% prevalence for regular doctor. Adjusted analysis revealed a direct and linear association with income. Women, age, health insurance and chronic health problem, were also associated with the outcome. Having a regular doctor determined a 20% overall increase in the likelihood of visit to a physician, and a 32% increase in the probability of clinical breast examination and 23% increase in cervical cancer prevention visits in women aged 40 or more. It increased the likelihood of prostate examination in men aged 40 or more by 84%. **Conclusions:** The prevalence of having a regular doctor in Brazil is low and directly associated with socioeconomic factors. Men and women with this characteristic have better access to health services, which emphasizes the importance of promoting Brazil's Family Physician Program and the need to reach the poorest groups.

Keywords: Regular doctor, Regular source of care, Continuity of patient care, Accessibility, Health services.