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Study: Medical imaging increases U.S. life expectancy

Written by Editorial Staff
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Increased utilization of advanced medical imaging has improved the life expectancy of patients in the United States by nearly nine months, according to a study released this month from the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The study, led by Columbia University economics professor Frank Lichtenberg, PhD, sought to determine the reach and effect of certain variables on U.S. life expectancy from 1991 to 2004: the effect of the quality of medical care, behavioral risk factors (obesity, smoking, AIDS incidence), and other variables (education, income and health insurance coverage) on life expectancy. In determining the quality of medical care, Lichtenberg evaluated average quality of diagnostic imaging procedures, average quality of practicing physicians and the mean vintage (FDA approval year) of outpatient and inpatient prescription drugs.

He found that life expectancy increased more rapidly in states that experienced larger increases in utilization of advanced medical imaging, but that those same states did not have larger increases in per capita medical expenditure. Based on this finding, he concluded that although newer diagnostic procedures and drugs are "more expensive than their older counterparts, they may reduce the need for costly additional medical treatment. The absence of a correlation across states between medical innovation and expenditure growth is inconsistent with the view that advances in medical technology have contributed to rising overall U.S. healthcare spending."

Advanced medical imaging techniques were attributed with increasing life expectancy by 0.62 to 0.71 years (out of a total 2.37 year increase) over the 14-year period in question, which is comparable with the 0.58 to 0.68 year decrease in life expectancy due to increased prevalence of obesity.

"As healthcare reform moves forward, and we work to identify the best ways to improve outcomes while reducing costs, this research provides helpful insights on some of the key influencers that can help us to do just that," commented Ilyse Schuman, managing director, Medical Imaging & Technology Alliance (MITA). "There is an undeniable correlation between increases in advanced medical imaging and increases in life expectancy."

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