Measuring Physician Quality: Evidence from Physician Availability

Joseph Doyle*

April 27, 2017

Abstract

Evidence on the types of physicians that achieve the best outcomes at the lowest cost are difficult to estimate due to patient sorting. This paper exploits the fact that physician scheduling leads to plausibly exogenous variation in the mix of physicians available on any given day that a patient enters the hospital. Using 100% Medicare claims data, one innovation in the paper is the construction of a proxy of the characteristics of these physicians, including specialty, experience, quality rankings, and treatment intensity tendencies. When 900,000 heart failure patients from around the US entering the hospital during the 1999-2011 period are compared, the availability of more cardiologists leads to more intensive treatment and higher survival. The results speak to the debate over the value of specialists given their higher costs.

*MIT and NBER
1 Introduction