

Health Facts

Geography and Medical Practice

Many factors influence the way that different doctors practice medicine, including where he or she attended medical school, the legal climate in an area, and tradition. But there are also big differences in the way doctors practice in different geographic areas of the country.



In fact, where you live can have a big impact on the type of (and how many) health services you receive. For example, research found that patients in Miami were receiving 60% more services than the same kind of patients in Minneapolis. Patients in Miami (where per person spending exceeded \$14,600) had more medical tests, underwent more procedures, and visited specialists more than patients in Minneapolis (where per person spending was about \$9,000).

Here's the most significant point: higher spending doesn't lead to better health outcomes. In the above study, patients in the areas with higher spending did not have better survival rates. Extra dollars didn't slow disease any better or make patients more satisfied. It was less likely that the patients in the areas with more spending were receiving preventive services like flu vaccines and pap smears.

Experts suggest that these differences have a lot to do with what is called "health care capacity": in other words, how many specialists and hospital beds are in a specific geographic area. What's the impact of this?

- ❑ **More Providers Means More Services.** The more hospital beds and the more specialists there are in an area, the more likely patients are to receive inpatient services. It's also more likely that the health care services in these areas will be more expensive.
- ❑ **Supply Creates Demand.** The supply of particular health care services helps to create demand for these very services. Generally, research suggests, physicians rarely even realize that this is the case.

Although providers in our area tend to be right at the national average (in terms of how many services are provided), it's important to be aware that where you live can impact the health care you receive. And it's vital for you to get informed about your condition, and to make sure that you understand treatment options that your doctor may proposing. To learn more about the impact of geography on how doctors practice medicine, visit www.dartmouthatlas.org. To learn more about your health condition, visit <http://medlineplus.gov> or www.mayoclinic.com.