

TITLE:

Is belonging to a regional health system more important than individual socioeconomic conditions in creating inequalities in waiting time for health care services?

Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Background: In the absence of priority criteria, waiting times are an implicit rationing instrument where the absence or limited use of prices creates an excess of demand. Even in the presence of priority criteria, waiting times may be unfair because they reduce health care demand of patients in lower socio-economic conditions. Longer waiting for treatments leads to dissatisfaction and may deteriorate patient's health status. Significant evidence has shown a relationship between socioeconomic status and the length of waiting time.

In Italy, as other OECD countries, NHS responsibilities have been decentralized to regional governments, potentially leading to a different access rate in the form of unequal waiting time within the same country.

This study aims to understand the reasons of geographic disparities in waiting times for health care services. In particular the role played by individual socioeconomic factors and context factors in affecting the probability to wait longer than the acceptable time, according to patients needs, across Italian regions.

Methods: Data from the 2013 Italian National Survey, on over 120,000 individuals, “Health conditions and recourse to the Health Services in Italy 2013” have been employed. The services studied are specialist visits and diagnostics.

Logistic regression models have been implemented to find out the existence of defined groups of citizens with higher risk to wait longer than the appropriate time according to their need.

Results: Results suggest that in Italy there are two vectors of disparities, the individual socioeconomic status (SES) and a second level factor, the geographical area of residence. Belonging to different regional systems leads to different probabilities of waiting more than necessary. The existence of these two dimensions implicate different political and organizational answers. The analysis also underlines the results for type of services.

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