Rural-Urban Differences in Surgical Procedures for Medicare Beneficiaries

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Objective: To determine whether Medicare beneficiaries in rural areas were less likely to undergo a variety of surgical procedures compared with their urban counterparts.

Design, Setting, and Patients: Cross-sectional study of Medicare beneficiaries.

Main Outcome Measure: Any incidence of the surgical procedures studied.

Results: Compared with urban Medicare beneficiaries, rural Medicare beneficiaries were more likely to undergo a broad array of surgical procedures: 35% more likely for carotid endarterectomy (odds ratio [OR] = 1.35; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.33-1.38), 32% for lumbar spine fusion (OR = 1.32; 95% CI, 1.29-1.35), 30% for knee replacement surgery (OR = 1.30; 95% CI, 1.28-1.31), 28% for abdominal aortic aneurysm repair (OR = 1.28; 95% CI, 1.24-1.31), 22% for prostatectomy (OR = 1.22; 95% CI, 1.19-1.24), 19% for hip replacement surgery (OR = 1.19; 95% CI, 1.17-1.21), 18% for aortic valve replacement (OR = 1.18; 95% CI, 1.14-1.21), 16% for open reduction and internal fixation of the femur (OR = 1.16; 95% CI, 1.14-1.18), and 15% for appendectomy (OR = 1.15; 95% CI, 1.11-1.19). To determine whether these differences could be explained by known confounding variables, we then used logistic regression to adjust for age, sex, race/ethnicity, median household income, average house value, mean poverty ratio, and state of residence. Rural beneficiaries were still more likely to undergo all of these surgical procedures.

Conclusions: Medicare beneficiaries living in rural areas were more likely to undergo a broad array of surgical procedures compared with those living in urban areas. While allaying some concern about rural access to surgical procedures, the uniformity of these results raises concern that people living in rural areas may have an overall poorer quality of health.


THERE ARE WELL-Documented disparities in who receives surgical procedures based on sex, race, and ethnicity.1-7 There are also concerns about whether there is a disparity in health care services provided to rural residents.8,9 Removing disparities is a health care priority, and good health care should not depend on where people live. Moreover, a disparity in the provision of care to rural residents would also have significant implications for the allocation of health care resources. It is becoming increasingly clear, for instance, that patient outcomes are better with hospitals and surgeons performing a higher volume of a given procedure, this approach must be balanced against the risk that rural patients may not receive a needed procedure if there are no nearby hospitals and surgeons.

Consistent with a potential disparity in health care delivery to rural residents, a recent study demonstrated that rural residents were less likely to be placed on a wait list for solid organ transplantation.13 Paradoxically, we recently found that rural Medicare beneficiaries were more rather than less likely to undergo total knee or hip replacement surgery.14 These results ran counter to our research hypothesis that rural residents would be less likely to undergo elective surgical procedures. We therefore evaluated our hypothesis of a rural disparity by evaluating surgical procedures more broadly and by including surgical procedures that are generally more discretionary and more likely to be done electively (such as lumbar spine fusion and total hip and knee replacement surgery) as well as those that are generally less dis-
METHODS

STUDY POPULATION

We obtained a deidentified Medicare Provider Analysis and Review File for 2006 from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. We also obtained the entire 2006 Medicare denominator file that constitutes the study cohort.

STUDY END POINTS

We identified each surgical procedure by hospital discharges using International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision, Clinical Modification diagnostic and procedure codes: AAA surgery (38.44, 39.25, 39.52, 39.71), aortic valve replacement (35.21, 35.22), nonincidental appendectomy (47.01, 47.09, 47.20, 47.91, 47.92, 47.99), carotid endarterectomy (CEA) (38.1x), lumbar spine fusion (81.04-81.08), total hip replacement surgery (81.51), total knee replacement surgery (81.54), open resection and internal fixation of the femur (79.35), and prostatectomy (60.21, 60.29, 60.30, 60.40, 60.50, 60.62, 60.69). For our primary end point, we included all incidences of these surgical procedures. As a secondary end point, we included only those surgical procedures designated as the primary procedure, which is the designation used if that procedure is the reason for admission to the hospital.

STUDY EXPOSURE

Because there is a continuum of change from rural to urban environments and because we anticipate that commuting patterns will best reflect health-seeking behavior, we evaluated each surgical procedure with a well-established rural-urban definition based on Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes, version 2.2,13 There are 33 RUCA codes, and the RUCA designations are on a 10-point scale that ranges from 1 as a large urban core area to 10 as an isolated rural area. This 10-point scale reflects the primary flow of commuting and has subscales to address secondary flow. Areas were assigned based on the zip code of Medicare beneficiaries. When reporting dichotomous rural-urban differences, we chose the established RUCA designations for small towns and rural areas, essentially designations 7 to 10, to indicate rural.

BENEFICIARY CHARACTERISTICS

The Medicare denominator file records the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of the beneficiaries. While use of the Medicare database ensures homogeneity for insurance status and affordability of health care, socioeconomic background of beneficiaries may nevertheless influence whether they obtain each surgical procedure. To help control for socioeconomic status in our analysis, we merged data from the US Census Bureau based on zip code region with data from our Medicare cohort. Data included median household income, median household income index (the median household income as a percentage of the national average), average house value, average house value index (the average house value as a percentage of the national average), mean poverty ratio (the individual's or family's income divided by the poverty threshold), and mean poverty ratio index (the mean poverty ratio as a percentage of the national average).14

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Age, sex, race/ethnicity, and economic measures for Medicare beneficiaries were compared by both the dichotomous rural-urban designations as well as the 10-point RUCA designations. In our analysis of the effect of rural or urban residency on undergoing each surgical procedure, we used logistic regression to adjust for age, sex, race/ethnicity, and state of residence. Because health policies can be established on a state level, we used state of residence as an indicator variable in our regression analysis to control for geographic variation. Based on the zip code census tabulation area for each subject, we also assessed for confounding by median household income, median household income index, average house value index, average house value index, mean poverty ratio, and mean poverty ratio index. We used the methods of Hosmer and Lemeshow17 to build our regression model. No adjustments were made for missing data. The final model included age, age squared, sex, race/ethnicity, median household income, average house value, mean poverty ratio, and state of residence.

Statistical analysis was performed with SAS version 9.1 statistical software (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, North Carolina). We used 2-sided P < .05 to indicate statistical significance for baseline characteristics of the study population, and we used 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for all other analyses.

RESULTS

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY POPULATION

There were 45,447,043 Medicare beneficiaries in 2006. Characteristics among rural and urban beneficiaries are shown in Table 1, with a RUCA designation of 1 indicating the most urban area and a RUCA designation of 10 indicating the most rural area. Rural Medicare beneficiaries were slightly younger. They had a higher percentage of white individuals compared with individuals of minority race/ethnicity. They also had a lower median household income, average house value, and mean poverty ratio.

MULTIVARIABLE ANALYSIS

Compared with urban Medicare beneficiaries, rural beneficiaries were significantly more likely to have undergone all of the surgical procedures we examined (Table 2), listed here in order of their odds ratio (OR): CEA (OR = 1.35; 95% CI, 1.33-1.38), lumbar spine fusion (OR = 1.32; 95% CI, 1.29-1.35), total knee replacement surgery (OR = 1.30; 95% CI, 1.28-1.31), AAA repair (OR = 1.28; 95% CI, 1.24-1.31), prostatectomy (OR = 1.22; 95% CI, 1.19-1.24), total hip replacement surgery (OR = 1.19; 95% CI, 1.17-1.21), aortic valve replacement (OR = 1.18; 95% CI, 1.14-1.21), open resection and internal fixation of the femur (OR = 1.16; 95% CI, 1.14-1.18), and appendectomy (OR = 1.15; 95% CI, 1.11-1.19). This pattern of a higher use of all of the tested surgical procedures in rural Medicare beneficiaries remained the same after adjusting for confounding variables, although the order based on the OR changed in some instances (Table 2). We obtained similar results when we analyzed those surgical procedures that were consid-
explained primary procedures (Table 2). All of the findings remained significant when we used the 10-point RUCA designations instead of the dichotomous rural-urban designations (data not shown).

**Comment**

Compared with their urban counterparts, we found that rural Medicare beneficiaries were significantly more likely to undergo a wide variety of surgical procedures that range from those that are generally more discretionary, such as total joint replacement surgery and lumbar spine fusion, to those that are generally less discretionary, such as CEA and appendectomy. The magnitude of this difference is also noteworthy, with rural patients being at least 20% more likely to undergo 5 of the 9 procedures studied. Rural beneficiaries were more likely to be white and male and were more likely to have a lower median household income, average house value, and mean poverty ratio. Because these factors can significantly influence whether patients undergo surgery, we controlled for these confounding variables to determine whether they explain these results. After adjusting for these variables as well as age and state of residence, rural Medicare beneficiaries remained significantly more likely to undergo the following, in order of their adjusted OR: aortic valve replacement, total hip replacement surgery, total knee replacement surgery, lumbar spine fusion, open reduction and internal fixation of the femur, CEA, prostatectomy, nonincidental appendectomy, and AAA repair. Thus, rurality, or an unmeasured variable associated with rurality, is associated with the increased likelihood of rural Medicare beneficiaries undergoing a wide variety of surgical procedures.

These results are consistent with our previous report that rural Medicare beneficiaries in 2005 were more likely to undergo elective total hip and knee replacement surgery. More importantly, we extend these findings by demonstrating that rural Medicare residents were more likely to undergo a wide variety of surgical procedures, including not only highly discretionary but also largely nondiscretionary procedures. Indeed, the top 4 surgical procedures that were more likely to be performed in rural residents included 2 that are largely nondiscretionary (lumbar spine fusion and CEA) and 2 that are generally more discretionary, such as total joint replacement surgery and lumbar spine fusion. The magnitude of this difference is also noteworthy, with rural patients being at least 20% more likely to undergo 5 of the 9 procedures studied. Rural beneficiaries were more likely to be white and male and were more likely to have a lower median household income, average house value, and mean poverty ratio. Because these factors can significantly influence whether patients undergo surgery, we controlled for these confounding variables to determine whether they explain these results. After adjusting for these variables as well as age and state of residence, rural Medicare beneficiaries remained significantly more likely to undergo the following, in order of their adjusted OR: aortic valve replacement, total hip replacement surgery, total knee replacement surgery, lumbar spine fusion, open reduction and internal fixation of the femur, CEA, prostatectomy, nonincidental appendectomy, and AAA repair. Thus, rurality, or an unmeasured variable associated with rurality, is associated with the increased likelihood of rural Medicare beneficiaries undergoing a wide variety of surgical procedures.

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The availability of surgical procedures for rural compared with urban beneficiaries is examined in the present longitudinal study. The prevalence for both total joint replacement surgery and coronary artery bypass surgery in rural beneficiaries was found to be significantly lower. The results of the study are consistent with previous findings. However, it is unclear whether cultural and other differences among these populations drive their decision of whether to undergo surgery. Therefore, the results of the study should be used to generalize the differences observed in rural versus urban surgical procedures.
ability of these surgical procedures in rural areas, although further studies are needed to determine whether there are problems with overuse or relative underuse in rural environments and to what extent the performance of these surgical procedures is driven by supply-sensitive care in either environment. It is also important to emphasize that rural environments are not homogeneous. Thus, some rural areas such as the more isolated rural areas and persistently poor rural areas may have significant access problems where surgical outreach or enhanced referrals may indeed be needed. Moreover, it is particularly important to emphasize that these studies may not generalize to nonsurgical care.

Rural Medicare beneficiaries were more likely to receive all of the surgical procedures examined, including both those that are more discretionary as well as those that are less discretionary. Thus, the most important question raised by the results of this study is whether rural residents have significantly poorer health than urban residents, even after adjusting for confounding variables. This would be consistent with surveys in which rural residents report poorer health than urban residents. Moreover, from a public health perspective, it is critical to determine whether the disproportionately higher frequency of surgical procedures for rural residents reflects poorer health among rural residents and therefore whether enhanced attention to primary care for rural residents would help reduce their surgical burden and improve their health.

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