CHAPTER 1

Impacts and Determinants of Health Levels in Low-Income Countries

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Abstract

Improved health in low-income countries could considerably improve wellbeing and possibly promote economic growth. The last decade has seen a surge in field experiments designed to understand the barriers that households and governments face in investing in health and how these barriers can be overcome, and to assess the impacts of subsequent health gains. This chapter first discusses the methodological pitfalls that field experiments in the health sector are particularly susceptible to, then reviews the evidence that rigorous field experiments have generated so far. While the link from in utero and child health to later outcomes has increasingly been established, few experiments have estimated the impacts of health on contemporaneous productivity among adults, and few experiments have explored the potential for infrastructural programs to impact health outcomes. Many more studies have examined the determinants of individual health behavior, on the side of consumers as well as among providers of health products and services.

Keywords
Behavior; Epidemiology; Externalities; Incentives; Information; Prevention; Public health; Subsidies

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1. INTRODUCTION

The links between health and economic development are many and varied. One of the most robust stylized facts of economic development is that higher income levels correlate strongly with longer life spans, lower infant mortality, and reduced illness throughout the life course (Deaton, 2013). Infectious diseases that kill millions in poor countries are largely unknown in the world’s wealthy societies, while sophisticated new curative technologies, procedures, and pharmaceutical advances often appear in wealthy economies years before they are available in low-income regions. The recent ravages of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa—which has killed tens of millions, and counting—have only deepened the divide between the global health have and have-nots. Even the briefest introspection makes it obvious that health levels are critical determinants of human wellbeing even beyond their impact on economic productivity, and that the health gaps across countries are a major contributor to global inequities.

This is a powerful and well-known pattern, but its underlying causes are not obvious or entirely clear. There are many channels that could plausibly contribute to the link between
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