

Surfing in Australia: Internet Access and provision of health care

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Abstract

The diffusion of high-speed internet has made information more accessible for both providers and patients. While previous studies have mostly focused on patient's responses (treatment choice, sleep, wellbeing, obesity and healthy behaviours, telehealth utilisation), we study the effect of broadband internet access on the supply side: physicians' provision of care. The roll out of the National Broadband Network (NBN) across Australia started in 2013 and created sharp time and geographic discontinuities in access to fast internet (more than doubling up the average download speed). We exploit these discontinuities using a difference in differences model. We link the geocoded historical NBN roll out data with physicians work addresses and detailed physician-level data from the Medicine in Australia: Balancing Employment and Life (MABEL) panel survey from 2012 to 2018. MABEL includes self-reported data from a representative sample of physicians on doctors' time use, consultation length, hours of work and number of patients. The survey data is complemented by administrative data from the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for the physicians who consented the linkage. These records include high-frequency data on every service billed and every prescription written, which allows us to investigate physicians billing behaviour and provision of care (quantity and mix of services). We provide evidence that physicians' access to online information affects their provision of care. Preliminary findings suggest that general practitioners with access to NBN prescribe more and we describe heterogeneous responses across different types of drugs. They also have fewer consultations and tend to have higher earnings and consultation fees.

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