

Lay Summary

Does the private sector provide better quality care for NHS patients than NHS hospitals?

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Around 10% of NHS funded elective treatments in England are carried out in private sector hospitals which are paid the amount per patient for the treatment as NHS hospitals.

We investigated whether quality of care differs between public and private hospitals. We used data from 2013/14 on 3.8 million NHS funded patients receiving 133 types of non-emergency treatments in 393 public and 190 private hospital sites.

Private hospitals treated patients with fewer comorbidities and past hospitalisations. Controlling for observed patient characteristics and treatment type, we found that patients treated in private hospitals had fewer emergency readmissions within 30 days of their elective treatment.

But patients' choice of hospital may be influenced by their unobserved morbidity. Moreover, private hospitals are also able to select less morbid patients. We allowed for potential unobserved differences in morbidity by predicting whether a patient was more likely to be treated in an NHS or private hospital by using their distance to the nearest provider of each type. Using the predicted type of hospital, rather than the actual type of hospital chosen, we found no statistically significant difference in the probability of an emergency readmission between NHS patients treated in private and NHS hospitals. Indeed the probability was greater for those treated in private hospitals.

Full paper available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.05.009>

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The Economics of Social and Health Care Research Unit is a joint collaboration between the Centre for Health Economics (CHE) at the University of York and the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) at the London School of Economics and the University of Kent. ESHCRU is supported by a grant awarded by the National Institute for Health Research Policy Research Programme: Policy Research Unit in Economics of Health and Social Care Systems.