

## Data Never Tell A Story

A widespread conceit in the fields known as 'social sciences' is that if one can attach a number to something, one has understood it. In fact, understanding has to come first, for numbers can hide facts as well as reveal them. For example, as David Henderson recently **commented** on Tech Central Station, a press release from the Commonwealth Fund makes the following claim:

"One-third of patients with health problems in the U.S. report experiencing medical, medication, or test errors, the highest rate of any nation in a new Commonwealth Fund international survey."

Presumably the Commonwealth Fund wants its readers to conclude that Americans get a worse deal from their health care system than do Canadians and Britons. And that this is because the US government is less interventionist in the health care market. And the natural moral of the story is that only the state can deliver good healthcare.

The American medical system may or may not make more mistakes: what the data really show depends on how alert the patients in the various countries are to this issue, and how inclined they are to regard something as a "medical error". But in any case, the mistakes reported in America are on average less severe than the ones in Canada and Britain. So if anything the Commonwealth Fund should have concluded the opposite.

Numbers themselves do not mandate any particular conclusion. We may count as similar things that are not at all similar, such as small mistakes and large mistakes. We can only draw reasonable conclusions from measured numbers when we classify and interpret them in the light of explanations that have been tested against rival explanations. The scientific approach entails trying to understand the facts through both one's own favoured explanation and the rival explanations. Trying to pigeonhole and control people by measuring vaguely defined numbers and interpreting them as justifications for political policy is not science but scientism and it is irrational. Political opinions disguised as scientific studies are dangerous. They do not deserve to be afforded the respect due to science.

Does the American medical system make more mistakes? What would be a reasonable view to take on that matter?

Is government intervention in medicine good? Why or why not?

by a reader on Fri, 12/02/2005 - 03:40 | [reply](#)

## Rival explanation

A quick search reveals that "one in every six (U.S.) doctors has a claim brought against him or her annually".

By contrast, one in every fifty Canadian doctors face a malpractice claim per year.

Perhaps Americans are more litigious than their counterparts in the Commonwealth Fund survey. That would account for the inflated claims of medical error.

Sources:

<http://www.thedoctors.com/newsroom/issues/medmalcrisis.asp>

<http://www.medlit.info/guests/mmpcanadian/medlit.htm>

by [a reader](#) on Sun, 12/04/2005 - 17:32 | [reply](#)

## Ratios

How many medical malpractice lawyers are there in the U.S. in relation to Canada, adusted for population?

Data in the form or ratios, certainly, but perhaps a co-related factor.

I remember reading once that the ratio of lawyers in the U.S. to those in Japan was some staggering difference. The Japanese public is therefore likely not litigious in much of anything. There could be a number of reasons for this. An ironic anime' would be the story of an ambulance chaser trying to make a living in Tokyo.

by a reader on Sun, 12/04/2005 - 19:38 | [reply](#)

## Ratios

There are more lawyers in any of a half dozen major American metropolitan areas than in all of Japan. Here laws have developed much more fully that allow individuals to seek legal redress on a wide range of issues. This undoubtedly has a large impact on the number of claims. I also think it's safe to say that there are more medical procedures per patient than in most similarly situated countries.

by [Michael Bacon](#) on Mon, 12/05/2005 - 01:48 | [reply](#)

## Socialized medicine's better at hiding errors

The explanation I prefer for this sort of discrepancy between

American medicine and that of more socialized medical systems is that socialized medicine is structurally better at hiding error than the American medicine. For one thing, the costs are externalized onto the taxpayers, rather than onto either the patients themselves or their private insurance companies.

Also, when malpractice occurs under socialized medicine, suing means suing the government.

A better metric to use would be the success rates for various types of medical treatments or procedures. That would tell you whether a better quality of medicine is available under which system.

Whenever I've seen that sort of data compared, American medicine has come out on top.

by Tim Starr on Thu, 12/08/2005 - 19:45 | [reply](#)