Rural-urban Differences in Family Medicine Physician Scope of Services

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In 2018, there were approximately 75 percent more primary care physicians (PCPs) per capita in US metropolitan areas than rural counties. The supply of specialists in the United States is even more concentrated in metropolitan areas than PCPs[1]. As a result, family physicians in rural areas tend to provide more comprehensive care,[6] a greater volume of care and a wider range of services,[5] and they are more likely to provide acute injury services and services related to treating pain.[7] Using Medicare claims data, this study used bivariate analysis and multivariate regressions to investigate the clinical service patterns of over 65,000 family medicine (FM) physicians to examine how the *range and focus* of services varied between those practicing in rural and urban areas. Of the 60,957 physicians providing at least 100 visits to Medicare fee-for-service (FFS) beneficiaries, 9,940 (16%) provided care in rural counties and 51,017 (84%) in urban counties. Rural physicians' services were 4.2% *less* focused across disease categories ($p<0.001$) compared to urban physicians. Rural physicians provided 3.0% *greater* range of services than their urban counterparts ($p<0.05$). That is, rural FM physicians were more likely to specialize less and provide more unique services. Contrary to our hypotheses, after adjusting for demographic, practice and geographic factors, rural and urban FM physicians appear to have similar overall degrees of concentration of diagnoses. Results instead underscore the importance of physician and practice characteristics, with physicians in office-based practices and/or self-employed solo practices, as well as females, and those who have been out of medical school longer having a higher concentration. This study underscores the complexity of factors affecting rural FM scope of practice including proximity to specialists and individual physician characteristics. These findings highlight the need for a nuanced approach to understanding scope that includes both the number of services provided by a physician and the degree to which their practice is focused across diagnosis categories.

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