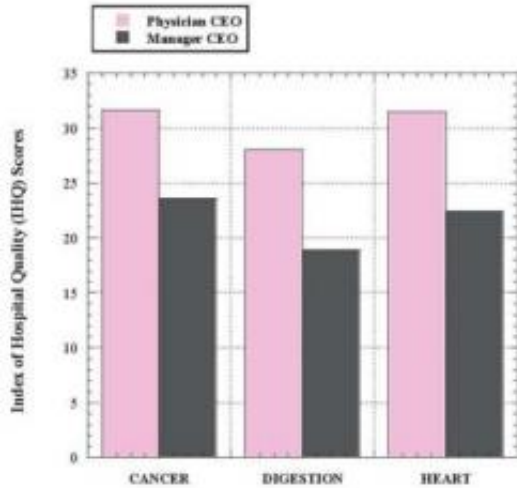


The best hospitals are run by physicians

6 July 2011



This is figure 1 from "Physician-Leaders and Hospital Performance: Is There an Association?", IZA Discussion Paper No. 5830. Credit: © IZA

Top-performing hospitals are typically ones headed by a medical doctor rather than a manager. That is the finding from a new study of what makes a good hospital.

The research, to be published in the elite journal [Social Science and Medicine](#), is the first of its kind. Its conclusions run counter to a modern trend across the western world to put generally trained managers -- not those with a medical degree -- at the helm of hospitals. This trend has been questioned, particularly by the Darzi Report, which was commissioned by the U.K. [National Health Service](#), but until now there has been no [clear evidence](#).

Amanda Goodall PhD, the author of the study, and a senior researcher at the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) in Bonn, Germany, constructed a detailed database on 300 of the most prominent hospitals in the United States. She then traced the professional background and [personal history](#) of each leader. The research focused particularly on hospital performance in the fields of cancer,

digestive disorders and [heart surgery](#).

The study shows that [hospital quality](#) scores are approximately 25% higher in physician-run hospitals than in the average hospital.

Goodall said: "Over the last few decades there has been a growing tendency for hospital boards to appoint managers as CEOs. These findings raise some [warning signs](#) over that trend."

She said: "According to the latest data, outstanding hospitals tend to be those run by somebody with a medical degree. I was surprised by the strength of the pattern. It seems that age-old conventions about having doctors in charge -- currently an idea that is out of favor around the world -- may turn out to have been right all along."

Barry Silbaugh M.D., the CEO of American College of Physician Executives, commented: "We are watching Dr Goodall's research carefully because it seems to finally provide a real evidence-base for physician leadership. This is something we have long supported."

Goodall stressed that more research would be needed before cause-and-effect could be truly understood. The study, a cross-sectional one, uses data from 2009. "This is an intriguing pattern but these snap-shot results for a single point in time do not prove that doctors make the best heads of hospitals, although they are consistent with that claim. More research following a range of hospitals through time is urgently needed," she said.

Provided by Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany

APA citation: The best hospitals are run by physicians (2011, July 6) retrieved 18 January 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-07-hospitals-physicians.html>

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