Congestion in the maternity ward:

Keep calm and don't close the door\*

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WORK IN PROGRESS

Abstract

During the past decades an increasing number of maternity wards have been closed in developed countries

arguing lack of sufficient resources to provide proper care to parturient women. Despite this, there is yet

no study that causally assesses the effects of congestion in the maternity ward on patient's health. This

paper proposes an innovative natural experiment exploiting the fact that for a big sample of births (not

scheduled) the time at which the indexed patient is admitted to the hospital is orthogonal to the number

of patients who are already there waiting to give birth. Results suggest that congestion has no direct effect

on patients' health. Nevertheless women who face a ratio of patients to midwives higher than 1.67 (about

half the study sample) see a 25% rise in the probability of delivering by C-section. Because these surgeries

are performed in a different sector of the hospital (the patient is moved out to the surgery room) this

result is understood as evidence of physicians adjusting to the temporarily capacity-constrained delivery

room. This effect is troublesome given the already overly high rates of C-sections that most rich countries

present nowadays.