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Linking health states to subjective well-being: An empirical study of 5,854 rural residents in China

Background: Measures of subjective well-being (SWB) can be useful in assessing policy interventions in various domains, but the application in healthcare is rare, for the role health states play in individuals' subjective evaluation of quality of life remains indefinite and most research are concerning patients other than the general population. This study was aimed to explore the correlation between health states and SWB of Chinese people and provide reference to the appraisal of China's health reform.

Methods: Data derived from a household survey conducted in 2010 with 5,854 rural residents included. SWB was obtained by the open-ended question used in the World Values Survey and health states were measured by prevalence of chronic diseases and EQ-5D, representing objective and subjective health status, respectively. To estimate the likelihood of reporting happiness, logistic regression was used.

Results: Gender differences was insignificant, while individuals with a higher education level and in a higher income group were more likely to report happiness. The difference between age groups was of no statistical significance when subjective health status was controlled. The likelihood of respondents with one or with multiple chronic diseases reporting happiness was significantly lower than those without, but the impact of multiple conditions became insignificant when subjective health states were controlled. The dimensions pain/discomfort and anxiety/depression had substantial negative effects on SWB with anxiety/depression exerting the strongest effect (OR=0.07).

Conclusions: It is people who have the final say in whether health services have improved their health. SWB could capture the full impact of health states and therefore could enable an overall assessment of China's health system reform from a novel perspective. Receiving much less attention than physical health, mental health is the principal determinant of SWB. Its development needs greater support from government, while the complete move away from physical health should be avoided.