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BUILDING RESILIENT HEALTH SYSTEMS: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FROM SIERRA LEONE AND THE 2014 EBOLA OUTBREAK*

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March 6, 2020

Abstract

Developing countries are characterized by high rates of mortality and morbidity. A potential contributing factor is the low utilization of health systems, stemming from the low perceived quality of care delivered by health personnel. This factor may be especially critical during crises, when individuals choose whether to cooperate with response efforts and frontline health personnel. We experimentally examine efforts aimed at improving health worker performance in the context of the 2014–15 West African Ebola crisis. Roughly two years before the outbreak in Sierra Leone, we randomly assigned two social accountability interventions to government-run health clinics — one focused on community monitoring and the other gave status awards to clinic staff. We find that over the medium run, prior to the Ebola crisis, both interventions led to improvements in utilization of clinics and patient satisfaction. In addition, child health outcomes improved substantially in the catchment areas of community monitoring clinics. During the crisis, the interventions also led to higher reported Ebola cases, as well as lower mortality from Ebola — particularly in areas with community monitoring clinics. We explore three potential mechanisms: the interventions (1) increased the likelihood that patients reported Ebola symptoms and sought care; (2) unintentionally increased Ebola incidence; or (3) improved surveillance efforts. We find evidence consistent with the first: by improving the perceived quality of care provided by clinics prior to the outbreak, the interventions likely encouraged patients to report and receive treatment. Our results suggest that social accountability interventions not only have the power to improve health systems during normal times, but can additionally make health systems resilient to crises that may emerge over the longer run.

*This study utilizes a field experiment implemented in collaboration with Sierra Leone's Decentralization Secretariat, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, World Bank, International Review Committee, Concern Worldwide, and Plan International. We thank the Njala University Museum and Archive for sharing the de-identified data on Ebola cases. We also thank Innovations for Poverty Action for collecting the original survey data, and the respondents for donating their time. Gijulie Adrians, Ak Ahmad, Carolina Bernal, Aisling Bourgeois, Dana Covich, Afra de Regt, Sarah Delyon, Caroline Fry, Kevin Givens, Anne Karing, Anthony Mwanney, Nicole Marigi, Nick Olin, Maritz Pöll and Minnie Schijven who provided excellent research assistance. For comments, we thank Rachel Glenister, Dan Posner, Manisha Shah, and workshop participants at Berkeley, Columbia, ISE, UC San Diego, Zurich, Yale, Northwestern, Stanford, Amsterdam, BIAP Nairobi, UCLA DHS, the World Bank's SBTA, and APFA. We gratefully acknowledge funding from USAID/DFP, the International Growth Centre, NWO grant 451-14-001, ESRC grant #ES/S013620/1, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ghana, and UCLA's California Center for Population Research. All errors are our own. The analysis of the survey-based outcomes was pre-registered on the AEA registry: <https://www.aeaincivestudy.org/trials/2020>

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Building Resilient Health Systems: Experimental Evidence from Sierra Leone and the 2014 Ebola Outbreak

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quality of care delivered by health personnel. This factor may be especially critical during crises, when individuals choose whether to cooperate with response efforts and frontline health personnel. We experimentally examine efforts aimed at improving health worker performance in the context of the 2014–15 West African Ebola crisis. Roughly two years before the outbreak in Sierra Leone, we randomly assigned two social accountability interventions to government-run health clinics — one focused on community monitoring and the other gave status awards to clinic staff. We find that over the medium run, prior to the Ebola crisis, both interventions led to improvements in utilization of clinics and patient satisfaction. In addition, child health outcomes improved substantially in the catchment areas of community monitoring clinics. During the crisis, the interventions also led to higher reported Ebola cases, as well as lower mortality from Ebola — particularly in areas with community monitoring clinics. We explore three potential mechanisms: the interventions (1) increased the likelihood that patients reported Ebola symptoms and sought care; (2) unintentionally increased Ebola incidence; or (3) improved surveillance efforts. We find evidence consistent with the first: by improving the perceived quality of care provided by clinics prior to the outbreak, the interventions likely encouraged patients to report and receive treatment. Our results suggest that social accountability interventions not only have the power to improve health systems during normal times, but can additionally make health systems resilient to crises that may emerge over the longer run.

March 06, 2020