

HEALTH AND ECONOMY

Affluence and increased cancer

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It is commonly thought that an increase of cancer incidence in affluent societies is primarily due to ageing populations. Intuitively, having a larger fraction of elderly people may increase the occurrence of illnesses associated with age. However, changes in environmental quality and lifestyles due to economic development can also increase the exposure to carcinogens, and therefore play as much of a role as ageing in the increase of cancer occurrence.

Tommaso Luzzati and colleagues from the University of Pisa, Italy, use multiple regression analysis to understand the relationship between new cancer cases and income in 122 countries. They use income per capita as a proxy for lifestyle and environmental quality changes associated with economic growth. They find that such a relationship is linear, rather than an inverted u-shaped environmental Kuznets curve — whereby the disease would increase and then decrease with economic growth. The linear increase of cancer incidence with growth of income per capita holds even after controlling for common alternative explanatory variables, such as population ageing or improved diagnostic systems. These findings call for policies to tackle the negative side effects that economic development has on health.

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