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## Specialists: bleeding hearts or profiteers?

2 March, 2016 | Hugo Wilcken

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Specialists vary their fees depending on what they think their patients can afford, report Australian economists.

On average, high-income patients are charged \$26 more for an initial consultation than those on a low income, according to data from a large population survey linked to Medicare rebate records.

But the mark-up varies substantially from specialty to specialty, with neurosurgeons charging their higher-income patients \$53 more for the initial consult.

Dermatologists and ENT specialists also discriminate highly according to income, while gastroenterologists top up their fees for the more wealthy by \$18.

The researchers from the University of Technology Sydney say their study looked only at specialists who saw both low- and high-income patients, who therefore had the opportunity to discriminate between the two groups.

That restriction also means it is unlikely that referring GPs are matching patients to specialists according to their income.

Around 80% of specialists charge their high-income patients more, and around 20% of specialists charge them an average of over \$50 more.

Specialists also tend to congregate in high-income areas, with only 10% located in areas of economic disadvantage.

The authors say specialists use age, private health insurance status and employment status to work out how much they think they can charge their patients.

But despite the lower fees paid by poorer patients, out-of-pocket expenses remain substantial compared with other healthcare providers such as GPs.

"There might be a case for devising incentives for specialists to charge low-income patients lower fees, similar to those in the GP market," the authors write.

**Health Economics 2016; online 23 Feb**

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