The German Healthcare Fact Check: Raising Public Awareness of Regional Variations and Overuse

Goals
The Healthcare Fact Check seeks to ...
- **map regional variations** in various healthcare issues.
- analyze the underlying causes of variation.
- identify possible solutions in order to reduce variations, and overuse in particular.
- provide the public with relevant information and recommendations for action.

Approach
- **Research**: 2-3 topic reports per year on examples of regional variations in health care, co-operation with renowned experts in the field concerned plus an interdisciplinary review.
- **Public involvement**: Communication via press, radio and TV with considerable response.
- **Patient empowerment**: Dedicated website for each topic.

Methodology
- Regional variations in *9* surgical procedures for *402* districts.
- Health data from German DRG statistics, classified according to district of residence.
- Direct standardization by age and sex.
- Classification of districts according to percentage deviation from the mean.

Results
- Magnitude of variation is **persistently high** (fig. 1).
- A remarkable number of all *402* districts have rates of surgery which are more than 30% above average in both periods (fig. 2).
- High variations seem to be **systematic**: The higher the extremal quotient, the more districts have more than 30% above-average rates of surgery (fig. 1 and fig. 3).
- There are **regional clusters** of districts with rates of surgery which are more than 30% above average for more than just one procedure (fig. 4).
- Regional patterns for rates of surgery generally remain the same.
- 10-13 districts remain in the top 20 districts with the highest rate of surgery in both periods.

Implications and demands
- **Better implementation of guidelines**.
- Clinical guidelines need to be finalized and published.
- Medical associations need to discuss the latitude of discretion when evaluating indications.
- The mandatory quality assurance process set out in Article 137a SGB V should (re-)consider a number of procedures.
- More attention should be paid to regions with highest rates of surgery.
- More research into the regional specifics that lead to high rates of surgery.

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