

How access to higher-quality care services affect the use of medical care for young children in urban South Africa

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Registration date 26/02/2025	Overall study status Completed	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistical analysis plan <input type="checkbox"/> Results
Last Edited 25/02/2025	Condition category Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual participant data <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

In many low-income areas, public healthcare services often suffer from poor quality and low accountability, leading people to delay using these services even when they are free. In South Africa, most people rely on free government healthcare, which is often of low quality and involves long waiting times. The South African government is considering a national health insurance scheme to provide free access to higher-quality private healthcare. This study aims to find out if access to free private care reduces under-use of services for children, if it increases overuse, and if the distance to private providers affects these outcomes.

Who can participate?

The study will include about 1,500 primary caregivers of at least one child aged six or under who do not have medical insurance.

What does the study involve?

Participants will be randomly assigned to one of three groups: a control group with free access to government facilities, or one of two treatment groups with free access to private providers located either relatively close or far away. Participants will complete two surveys at the start and end of the 12-week study period, keep a daily diary of their child's symptoms and healthcare use, and have weekly 10-minute visits from a researcher to collect data from the diary.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?

There are no direct risks for participants. Those in the treatment groups will get subsidised access to private care for one of their children. All participants will continue to have access to free public healthcare services. Participants' confidentiality will be protected, and results will be reported only at the group level.

Where is the study run from?

Centre for Health Policy (CHP) at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
March 2022 to August 2024

Who is funding the study?
Medical Research Council, UKRI Reference MR/T023635/1 (UK)

Who is the main contact?
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Contact information

Type(s)

Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

Clinical Trials Information System (CTIS)

Nil known

ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT)

NCT06275867

Protocol serial number

SOPRIMA//T023635

Study information

Scientific Title

The impact of access to higher-quality care services on healthcare utilization for children aged under 5 years: a randomized controlled trial in urban South Africa

Acronym

SOPRIMA

Study objectives

1. Free private care reduces underuse of services for children
2. Free private care increases overuse of services for children
3. These effects are mitigated by the distance between households and private providers

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)

1. approved 18/03/2022, University of the Witwatersrand, Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) (1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 2000, South Africa; +27(0) 11 717 1408; hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za), ref: H22/03/32

2. approved 17/03/2024, London School of Economics Research Ethics Committee (Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom; +44 (0)20 7852 3629; research.ethics@lse.ac.uk), ref: 57203

Study design

Multicentre interventional randomized controlled trial

Primary study design

Interventional

Study type(s)

Other

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Common conditions in children under-5

Interventions

Participants are the primary caregivers of at least one child aged five years or under. Participants are randomly allocated to one of three groups in equal proportions: a control group (CONTROL) with default free access to government facilities; a treatment group with free access to government facilities and to a network of private providers located close by (CONVENIENT); or a treatment group with free access to government facilities and to a network of private providers

located far away (INCONVENIENT). In treatment groups, participants have unlimited access for one of their children (chosen at random) to private providers for 12 weeks. Randomisation is done after recruitment using a computer.

Intervention Type

Other

Primary outcome(s)

1. Underuse: the proportion of caregivers who do not seek 'recommended' care for their child at least once, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (recommended care is defined against community-IMCI guidelines).
2. Overuse: the proportion of caregivers who seek unnecessary care for their child at least once, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (unnecessary care is defined against community-IMCI guidelines: care is unnecessary if it does not meet the threshold of recommended care).

Key secondary outcome(s)

1. Appropriate, timely use: the proportion of caregivers who seek care for their child exactly when 'recommended' at least once, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (recommended care is defined against community-IMCI guidelines).
2. Number of appropriate, timely visits: the number of timely visits made by a caregiver for their child, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (a timely visit is done exactly when care is 'recommended' according to the community-IMCI guidelines).
3. Appropriate, delayed use: the proportion of caregivers who seek care for their child after it is 'recommended' at least once, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (recommended care is defined against community-IMCI guidelines).
4. Number of appropriate, delayed visits: the number of delayed visits made by a caregiver for their child, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries (a delayed visit is done after care is 'recommended' according to the community-IMCI guidelines).
5. Underuse of care: the number of days of illness where care-seeking is recommended but not sought by the child's parent or guardian measured through daily symptoms and health-seeking data collected over 12 weeks.
6. Overuse: the proportion of primary health care visits made by the household that are considered unnecessary measured through daily symptoms and health-seeking data collected over 12 weeks (unnecessary care is defined against community-IMCI guidelines: care is unnecessary if it does not meet the threshold of recommended care).
7. Public care use: the proportion of caregivers who seek care for their child at least once at a government health care facility, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries.
8. Private care use: the proportion of caregivers who seek care for their child at least once at a private GP, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries.
9. Pharmacy use: the proportion of caregivers who seek care for their child at least once in a pharmacy, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries.
10. Out-of-pocket expenditures: the total direct (consultations, drugs) and indirect (transport) expenditures spent on health care, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries.
11. Waiting time: time spent by caregivers on transport and at facilities waiting to seek care, measured over 12 weeks with health diaries.
12. Health knowledge: Index of knowledge of parents in relation to preventive and curative care. Parents will answer a series of knowledge questions relative to care-seeking patterns for children (with correct and incorrect responses). For each individual, a score will be computed by adding up all of the correct responses (1 point per correct response, 0 for incorrect), so a higher score will reflect a better knowledge. Captured in the endline survey at 12 weeks after the start of the intervention.

Completion date

30/08/2024

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria

1. The parent or primary caregiver who has a child aged under 5 years old and over 2 months old
2. Resident in selected clusters of the Soweto Health and Demographic Surveillance site (HDSS) that are part of the Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS) study.

Participant type(s)

Other

Healthy volunteers allowed

No

Age group

Adult

Lower age limit

16 years

Upper age limit

90 years

Sex

All

Total final enrolment

1415

Key exclusion criteria

1. Is planning to move out of the area in the next 3 months
2. Has private medical aid

Date of first enrolment

19/01/2024

Date of final enrolment

16/02/2024

Locations

Countries of recruitment

South Africa

Study participating centre

Mapetla HDSS Soweto Cluster

Mapetla, Soweto
Johannesburg
South Africa
1818

Study participating centre**Meadowlands East Zone 4 HDSS Soweto Cluster**

Meadowlands East Zone 4, Soweto
Johannesburg
South Africa
1852

Study participating centre**Meadowlands East Zone 5 HDSS Soweto Cluster**

Meadowlands East Zone 5, Soweto
Johannesburg
South Africa
1852

Study participating centre**Mofolo North HDSS Soweto Cluster**

Mofolo North, Soweto
Johannesburg
South Africa
1801

Study participating centre**Phiri HDSS Soweto Cluster**

Phiri, Soweto
Johannesburg
South Africa
1818

Sponsor information

Organisation

London School of Economics and Political Science

ROR

<https://ror.org/0090zs177>

Organisation

University of the Witwatersrand

ROR

<https://ror.org/03rp50x72>

Funder(s)

Funder type

Research council

Funder Name

Medical Research Council

Alternative Name(s)

Medical Research Council (United Kingdom), UK Medical Research Council, MRC

Funding Body Type

Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype

National government

Location

United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study will be published as a supplement to the results publication

IPD sharing plan summary

Published as a supplement to the results publication

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Participant information sheet	Participant information sheet	11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes