

The Forgotten Five Billion: Improving Surgical Services in Low and Middle-Income Countries

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Five billion people in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) lack access to safe and timely surgery. A paucity of specialist equipment like surgical instruments – which doctors use to operate on patients; and anaesthetic machines – which help keep patients alive while they undergo an operation – contributes to the problem.

However, the problem of lack of healthcare supplies in LMICs are not unique to surgery. The literature shows the issue is particularly analogous to that of poor access to HIV medications seen prior to 2000. Here too, there were “market failures” – mismatches in the needs of suppliers and those in need of supplies. In both instances high prices are encouraged by patent protection and producers setting prices with high income countries in mind. This

makes essential supplies unaffordable to many and they go unpurchased despite the need. The poor purchasing power of patients, healthcare facilities and governments in low income states does not incentivise the development of new technology designed specifically with LMICs use in mind.

The Clinton Health Access Initiative, a health foundation, intervened to improve access to HIV drugs and diagnostic equipment. As the market failures in access to surgical equipment are equivalent to those in the market for HIV medication pre-2000, the same approach could be used to address deficiencies in surgical provision. However, the scale of the problem is far greater. The lack of solutions thus far highlights to the need for major foundations in Global Health to put surgery on their agenda.