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More education is what makes people live longer, not more money



Cuba is poor, but has good education and high life expectancy
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By **Debora MacKenzie**

MORE money, longer life, right? The latest research suggests that education actually plays a bigger role in extending lifespan. The finding could have huge implications for public health spending.

Back in 1975, economists plotted life expectancies against countries' wealth, and concluded that wealth increases longevity. It seemed self-evident: everything people need to be healthy – from food to medical care – costs money.

But soon it emerged that the data didn't always fit that theory. Economic upturns

didn't always mean longer lives. In addition, a given gain in GDP caused increasingly higher gains in life expectancy over time, as though it was becoming cheaper to add years of life. Moreover, in the 1980s, research revealed that gains in literacy were associated with greater increases in life expectancy than those related to gains in wealth.

Finally, the more-educated people in any country tend to live longer than their less-educated compatriots. But such people also tend to be wealthier, so it has been difficult to figure out which factor is increasing lifespan.

Wolfgang Lutz and Endale Kebede of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Austria have now untangled the pieces of the puzzle by compiling average data on GDP per person, lifespans and years of education from 174 countries, dating from 1970 to 2010.

The pair found that wealth correlated with longevity. But the correlation between longevity and years of schooling was closer, with a direct relationship that didn't change over time.

“These findings suggest schools may be a better health investment than high-tech hospitals”

When Lutz and Kebede put both factors into the same mathematical model, they found that differences in education closely predicted differences in life expectancy, whereas changes in wealth barely mattered (*Population and Development Review*, doi.org/cnm6).

Lutz argues that because schooling generally happens long before a person's life expectancy comes into play, this correlation reflects cause: better education drives longer life. He thinks this education permanently improves a person's cognitive abilities, allowing better planning and self-control for the rest of their life.

Education also tends to lead to more wealth, which is why wealth and longevity are also correlated. But what is important, says Lutz, is that wealth doesn't seem to be driving longevity – both are driven by education.

“Some medical professionals may not like these findings,” says Lutz, because they suggest schools may be a better health investment than high-tech hospitals.

Sangheon Lee, at the UN International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, agrees that education affects lifespan, but doubts that such simple models can fully resolve cause and effect.

Lutz argues that extreme examples are telling. “Cuba is dead poor, but has a higher life expectancy than the US because it is well-educated.” Meanwhile, in oil-rich but poorly educated Equatorial Guinea, people rarely reach 60.

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