

CORE DISCUSSION PAPER  
2003/89

**THE “GATEKEEPING” ROLE OF GENERAL  
PRACTITIONERS. DOES PATIENTS’ INFORMATION  
MATTER ?**

Paula GONZALEZ<sup>1</sup>

December 2003

**Abstract**

We deal with a principal-agent model in which the health authority acts as a principal for both a patient and a General Practitioner (GP). In this framework, we study the role of GPs as filters for secondary care, emphasizing the implications that patients’ information may have for health authorities. We derive the GP’s payment contract that induces him to perform diagnosis and follow its recommendation, as well as the level of copayments that provide patients with incentives to select the appropriate medical provider. We show that when patients can freely choose their provider, the quality of their information has contradictory effects. The higher this quality is, the lower the expected losses the patient bears. A higher quality, however, worsens the GP’s agency problem, as GPs have more incentives to use patients’ information as a substitute for their own diagnosis. We also analyze the role of patients’ pressure for referral on the choice of the optimal system to access secondary care.

**Keywords:** general practice, incentives, patients’ beliefs, patients’ pressure, referrals.

*JEL Classification:* D82, H51, I18, L51.

---

<sup>1</sup>CORE, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium.  
E-mail: gonzalez@core.ucl.ac.be

I am indebted to Maurice Marchand and Nicolas Porteiro for useful discussions and valuable suggestions. I am also grateful to Louis Eeckhoudt, Izabela Jelovac and Motohiro

---

Sato for their helpful comments. Financial support from Fundacion Pedro Barrié de la Maza is gratefully acknowledged. The usual disclaimers apply.

This paper presents research results of the Belgian Program on Interuniversity Poles of Attraction initiated by the Belgian State, Prime Minister's Office, Science Policy Programming. The scientific responsibility is assumed by the author.