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Does the Lunar Cycle Affect Birth and Deaths?

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ABSTRACT

There is a commonplace notion that full moons affect natality and mortality. To test this theory, we obtain daily births and deaths data from Australia, covering all 10,592 days from 1 January 1975 to 31 December 2003. We find that full moons are not associated with any significant change in the number of conceptions, births, or deaths. Moreover, our standard errors are sufficiently tight to make it possible to rule out even modest positive or negative effects of the lunar cycle.

JEL Codes: I12, J13.

Keywords: conceptions, births, deaths, timing, lunar cycle, full moon

1. Introduction

It is frequently suggested that full moons may be associated with higher rates of conception, births or deaths. While past studies have mostly rejected the presence of full moon effects (eg. Kelly et al 1996; Owen et al 1998; Chapman and Morrell 2000; Arliss et al 2005) some have found significant relationships (eg. Lieber 1978; Bhattacharjee 2000). If the lunar cycle has significant effects on conception, birth rates, or death rates, then doctors would need to take it into account when advising couples hoping to fall pregnant, while hospital administrators ought to adjust their staffing in maternity wards and emergency departments. The effect of full moons is therefore more than a curio; if an effect exists, it has substantial implications for health policy.

2. Does the Full Moon Affect Natality and Mortality?

To test the impact of the full moon on recorded births, we use daily data on the number of Australian births and deaths. These data are collected by state and territory registries, and compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The data cover all 10,592 days from 1 January 1975 to 31 December 2003, encompassing a total of 7,108,772 births and 3,707,146 deaths. We opt to focus on the raw number of births and deaths, rather than on the rate. This has the advantage that we do not introduce noise into our series through mis-measurement of the total population, which is only available on a monthly basis.

Dates are coded as full moons if that day is a full moon, or a full moon occurs on the preceding or subsequent day (in a typical lunar cycle, 98-100 percent of the moon’s surface is illuminated for a three-day period).¹ Since full moons occur approximately once per month, we therefore code about 10 percent of days as “full moons”. Our results are unchanged if we code only one day per month as a full moon. Table 1 presents summary statistics.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Births per day	10592	671.144	113.872	367	948
Deaths per day	10592	327.082	43.139	210	490
Full moon	10592	0.101	0.301	0	1

When analysing the effect of full moons on conception, we assume that conception occurs 266 days prior to birth. There are two limitations in this strategy: many pregnancies are longer or shorter than 266 days, and not all pregnancies are carried to term. Nonetheless, using a large dataset covering 29 years of births, the presence of any substantial “full moon effect” on conception should show up as an increase in the birth rate nine months later.

We estimate the effect of full moons on conception using ordinary least squares regression, with robust standard errors. We first present results both without any controls, and then with indicator variables for the day of the year (366 values), the day of the week (7 values), and the year (29 values).

¹ See discussion at <<http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/MoonFraction.html>>

Our results are shown in Table 2. We find no statistically significant effect of the full moon on the number of conceptions, births or deaths. Including indicator variables to take account of day-of-year, day-of-week, and year fixed effects has little effect on the point estimates, but does reduce the standard errors.

Table 2: Effect of the full moon on conceptions, births and deaths
Ordinary least squares estimates, using daily births and deaths data

	Conceptions	Births	Deaths
Panel A: No controls			
Full Moon	0.879 [3.715]	0.906 [3.710]	-0.027 [1.372]
Observations	10592	10592	10592
R-squared	0.00	0.00	0.00
Panel B: Controlling for day-of-week, day-of-year, and year effects			
Full Moon	0.790 [1.349]	0.740 [1.361]	-0.193 [0.706]
Observations	10592	10592	10592
R-squared	0.89	0.89	0.75

Notes: Robust standard errors in brackets. * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%. Full moon is coded as occurring for three days per lunar cycle. Controls in Panel B are day-of-week, day-of-year, and year fixed effects.

Our 95 percent confidence intervals all span zero, and are quite tight, allowing us to reject substantial negative or positive effects of full moons. When we control for date effects, the 95 percent confidence intervals are, for conceptions {-1.854 to 3.433}; for births {-1.926 to 3.406}; and for deaths {-1.577 to 1.191}.

We can therefore rule out, at the 95 percent confidence level, effects on conceptions, births or deaths larger than 1/27th of a standard deviation.

3. Conclusion

A belief that lunar cycles affects fertility, births and deaths remains widespread. Analysis of births and deaths data for Australia over a 29-year period finds no effect of the full moon on conception, birth, and deaths. The large sample size allows us to reject even modest effects of the full moon on these outcomes.

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