

■ As extra-luggage fees and growing security restrictions vex travelers, services have emerged as ways to bypass the hassles of checking bags.

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A government Web site now compares experiences with hospital doctors and nurses

A WORD FROM THE PATIENTS

By LYNN COOK
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

A government Web site that tracks hospital outcomes for procedures ranging from heart catheters to hysterectomies has a new feature — patient feedback.

HospitalCompare.hhs.gov was launched three years ago by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the largest payer in the U.S. health care system. In addition to looking at how hospitals stack up against one another in areas ranging from adult cancer care to outpatient knee surgery, the site now compares patient experiences with doctors and nurses.

Locally, The Methodist Hospital in the Texas Medical Cen-

ter received the highest overall patient satisfaction rating. Eighty percent of those surveyed said they would definitely recommend the nonprofit hospital.

"We're excited and proud of our thousands of employees and the doctors who practice here because, ultimately, that's what people are talking about," said Dr. Marc Boom, executive vice president of The Methodist Hospital. "People know when they're in a good hospital."

Bayshore Medical Center in Pasadena and East Houston Regional Medical Center, both owned by HCA, a private for-profit health care firm, had the lowest ratings. Forty-eight percent of each facility's patients

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HOSPITALS: Some not yet rated on Web site

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surveyed said they would definitely recommend it.

"We certainly do not enjoy this low ranking, but we participated voluntarily so we could be transparent and learn from it," said Jeff Holland, chief executive officer of Bayshore Medical Center.

Holland joined Bayshore in May 2006, around the time it started compiling patient satisfaction data for HospitalCompare. Since then, Holland says, staff training and streamlining procedures have boosted those numbers.

"We came in with a historical problem but, within the HCA system, we've moved to the upper half of hospitals in terms of patient satisfaction," he said, adding new patient surveys are reported quarterly so the HospitalCompare site should reflect Bayshore's improved rating soon.

Clay Franklin, CEO of East Houston Regional Medical Center, defended the facility: "We are a good hospital. We provide good care. We're kind of a beacon of light out here by ourselves on the east side."

East Houston now has patient satisfaction teams to address some of the problem points that came up in the survey. As a result, nurses now make hourly rounds to every room, checking to make sure patients' pain is under control and they do not need help repositioning themselves in bed, Franklin said.

More transparency

The drive for data is part of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' efforts to bring greater transparency to health care while cutting costs. Hospital participation is voluntary for now, said Don McCloud, a spokesman for the Web site.

About half the nation's hospitals have reported patient satisfaction data, which is collected by independent companies that survey patients within days of their discharge from a facility.

The respondents are picked randomly from among all patients 18 and older, regardless of whether they are covered by one of the federal health care programs.

Not a complete list

Results for a few of Houston's biggest medical institutions are not online, including the Memorial Hermann Healthcare System and the Harris County Hospital District.

Spokeswoman Ann Brimberry said Memorial Hermann administrators decided not to let their results go online this year because they found glitches in data that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services sent to hospitals last winter for fact checking.

Peter Ashkenaz, who oversees HospitalCompare, acknowledged problems with the initial data sent but said all in-

formation was cleaned up, verified and sent to hospitals for comment before being published on the Web site at the end of March.

Several smaller for-profit hospitals also aren't on the site.

One of them, University General Hospital, began collecting data through a third party last summer, spokeswoman Laura Comer said, but it won't show up online at HospitalCompare until late 2008 or early 2009. Comer said the Web site requires a full year of data before releasing the information to the public.

Even then, there can be a lag time of a few months.

Congress has mandated that hospitals get lower reimbursement payments for Medicare and Medicaid patients if they refuse to report medical outcomes, such as morbidity rates for heart attack patients.

Penalties may come later

So far there is no penalty for refusing to compile patient satisfaction data, but that is probably coming, said Douglas Dotan, CEO of Houston-based

"It's hard to dispute what people are saying. If you look at these surveys, they're not ambiguous. Did they answer your call bell? They either answered it or they didn't. Did they explain your medications to your satisfaction? If a patient didn't get it, they didn't get it."

—DOUGLAS DOTAN

CEO of Houston-based CRG Medical

CRG Medical, which consults with hospitals on patient risk reduction.

He also chairs the health care division of the American Society for Quality, a 100,000-member organization that studies and promotes quality improvements.

"We'll be testing this for a few years," Dotan predicts. "But what's been voluntary is going to become a requirement. I believe it's going to start with hospitals, but individual doctors will be next."

Rating individual doctors

Dotan was referring to the Physician Quality Reporting Initiative, another effort by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

It offers an incentive payment for doctors who voluntarily report quality measurements of their own practices, such as their use of electronic medical records.

The hospital satisfaction surveys ask questions about how attentive nurses were, whether

LISTENING TO THE PATIENT

About half of Houston-area hospitals are gauging patient satisfaction through independent surveys that then are reported on a government Web site. The percentage of patients who said they definitely would recommend the hospitals where they received treatment:

NATIONAL AVERAGE: 67

percent)

Bayshore Medical Center: 48

percent

Christus St. Catherine

Hospital: 78 percent

Christus St. John Hospital:

78 percent

Clear Lake Regional Medical

Center: 55 percent

Cypress Fairbanks Medical

Center: 64 percent

East Houston Regional

Medical Center: 48 percent

Houston Northwest Medical

Center: 66 percent

Kingwood Medical Center: 62

percent

Methodist Hospital (Texas

Medical Center): 80 percent

Methodist Hospital Sugar

Land: 79 percent

Methodist Willowbrook

Hospital: 79 percent

Park Plaza Hospital: 66

percent

San Jacinto Methodist

Hospital: 61 percent

Spring Branch Medical

Center: 57 percent

St. Joseph Medical Center:

68 percent

St. Luke's Episcopal

Hospital: 73 percent

Texas Orthopedic Hospital:

78 percent

Twelve Oaks Medical Center

(now called River Oaks

Hospital): 58 percent

West Houston Medical

Center: 55 percent

Woman's Hospital of Texas:

66 percent

Not participating

Doctors Hospital Tidwell

First Street Hospital

(Bellaire)

Foundation Surgical Hospital

Harris County Hospital

District

Healthsouth Hospital for

Specialized Surgery

Healthsouth Rehabilitation

Hospital (Humble)

Houston Physicians' Hospital

Innova Hospital

Kingwood Specialty Hospital

Memorial Hermann

Healthcare System

North Cypress Medical

Center

Renaissance Hospital

Riverside General Hospital

Surgical Specialty Hospital of

Sugar Land

TOPS Surgical Specialty

Hospital

University General Hospital

University of Texas M. D.

Anderson Cancer Center

Vista Medical Center

Hospital

Source:
HospitalCompare.hhs.gov.
(most recent update March 21)

medication and potential side effects were explained adequately, and whether facilities were clean and quiet.

"It's hard to dispute what people are saying. If you look at these surveys, they're not ambiguous," Dotan says.

"Did they answer your call bell? They either answered it or they didn't. Did they explain your medications to your satisfaction? If a patient didn't get it, they didn't get it."

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KEVIN FUJII: CHRONICLE

RATED BY PATIENTS: Dr. Marc Boom, right, Methodist Hospital executive vice president, gives directions to Magdalene Matthews last week. The hospital scored highest locally in patient satisfaction as reported on a government Web site.