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Finally, Accurate Report Cards Will Be Released on Doctors' Safety and Quality of Care

Knowledge, they say, is power. It's also a necessary tool for crafting cost-effective medical practices and protecting patient safety.

Medicare has an enormous claims database from which valuable knowledge can be mined. Finally, within about one year, employers, insurance companies and consumer groups will be able to unearth its information to produce "report cards" on doctors and hospitals.

This blog has championed this [access to information](#), and the subject also figures mightily in "The Life You Save: Nine Steps to Finding the Best Medical Care and Avoiding the Worst," [my book](#) about patient advocacy and medical mistakes.

As described in an [Associated Press story](#), researching a health-care provider's history in the Medicare database has not been possible before, thanks to a decades-old court decision. Releasing such information, the ruling read, violates the privacy of doctors. The medical establishment was vigorous and vocal in not wanting the people who pay for and receive its ministrations to know how its members rate.

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Congress and the executive branch disagreed. For once, both parties were unified on this issue, and federal law has been revised to authorize access to the Medicare database.

What does this mean to the average patient? Suppose you need a knee replacement. Wouldn't it be nice to compare potential surgeons by how many such procedures they've performed, if there were preventable complications and how many?

Experts who analyze Medicare's billing records glean critical information that not only promotes quality care, it reduces cost and waste by promoting practitioners who are skilled and responsive. The delivery of health care is more efficient and outcomes improve when complications, readmissions and legal adventures are kept to a minimum.

"This is a giant step forward in making our health care system more transparent," said Marilyn Tavenner, Medicare's acting administrator of the newly accessible Medicare mother lode.

Performance reports could be available to consumers by the end of next year. Although individual doctors will be identified in the files, patient names and personal information will not.

Companies are keen to identify the economies of scale that will emerge from analyzing Medicare's data as it applies to their insurance coverage. But some employer groups also want their workers to know how well their health-care providers are doing their jobs. An executive with the Business Roundtable, which represents CEOs of major corporations, told AP, "We want to make it understandable and usable by our employees. That has always been the goal."

The American Medical Association, which represents doctors, claimed that this data could be misleading or misunderstood by the average consumer. A surgeon with many patients who develop complications, for example, actually might be a top practitioner. He or she just might be willing to accept difficult cases others reject.

There are accommodations to the medical community—providers have the right to see their information before it is released publicly, and they will have 60 days to challenge it.

And Medicare promises to screen the analytical methods of groups requesting access to the data, which isn't free—access to the files comes at a cost.

The price for transparency is worth it.

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