

How hospitals compare

Consumers rate 4 major local facilities about same

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Palmetto Health Heart Hospital nurse Mary Jane Daquilnea works at her station as transporter Christopher Walters passes by a fourth-floor station bulletin board where staff members post goals and track progress of that unit in various areas, including customer service and quality of care.

- [How local hospitals scored](http://www.myschospital.org/docs/localHosps.pdf)

Compare hospitals

Web sites that let you to see how hospitals stack up against each other:

- Department of Health and Human Services:
<http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov>
- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control:
<http://www.scdhec.gov/health/disease/hai>
- S.C. Hospital Association: <http://www.myschospital.org>
Click on "Reports" then "Go to Reports Now"
- Consumer Reports:
<http://www.consumerreports.org/health/doctors-and-hospitals/hospital-home.htm>

Patients don't seem to think the four Midlands area hospitals differ much when it comes to customer service. That's according to results from a satisfaction survey posted recently on a government Web site.

Lexington Medical Center scored highest on eight out of 10 measures. But the numbers weren't much higher than for the other hospitals.

Midlands hospitals earn their highest marks for how well doctors communicate — 80 percent or more patients gave them good ratings. Much fewer are happy with how fast they get help they need.

The Internet site, <http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov>, doesn't rank or rate hospitals. Readers have to muddle through and draw their own conclusions of findings such as:

- 66 percent to 70 percent of patients rated Providence Hospital, Lexington Medical Center, Palmetto Health Richland and Palmetto Health Baptist hospitals a 9 or 10 out of a possible 10.
- 23 percent to 37 percent of patients reported that rooms and bathrooms were not always clean.
- 70 percent to 77 percent said they would definitely recommend their hospital to someone else.

Releasing information on how hospitals treat patients — and how patients feel about that care, reflects a new culture of openness in health care and a desire to make patients happy, not just healthy.

"We take very seriously the reports we get from our patients," said Dr. Shawn Stinson, who is in charge of patient safety and clinical quality at Palmetto Health. "It makes a big difference in how we focus our efforts — if we hear from patients that their pain needs are not being attended to, it does drive the way we behave."

Some providers resist the move to air what goes on within hospital walls but comply with the survey because they might get less government money otherwise.

"The purpose of the Web site is to increase public accountability," said Liz Goldstein, who directs the Health and Human Services department that oversees the customer satisfaction survey.

The information probably won't make patients change radically how they pick hospitals, especially since most people just go where their doctors tell them to or hospitals their insurance covers.

Still doctors and hospitals are paying attention.

"The thing that I like most about the site is potentially the most painful — it's the transparency," Stinson said. "It lights a fire under an organization to go to the next level. We want to be the best in our market."

Federal officials and doctors warn that people shouldn't pick their hospitals solely based on information on the site, but to use things that catch their eye as discussion starters with their doctors.

"Is this data going to be easy for patients to interpret and use? Probably not," said economist Michael Cannon, director of Health Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.

And while he is not "a big fan of government doing this sort of thing," Cannon, co-author of "Healthy Competition: What's Holding Back Health Care and How to Free It," said giving such information to the public is a good move.

There has been a flood of comparative hospital information for patients in recent months:

- The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control launched a Web site releasing infection control information from state hospitals, as mandated by the state legislature.
- The S.C. Hospital Association put up its own comparison site.
- Consumer Reports launched a Web site that lets you compare how "aggressively" and expensively hospitals offer care.

Some people in Columbia are lukewarm about the government site.

Consumer advocate John Ruoff finds it annoying that he can't do side-by-side comparisons for all four major area hospitals — the site allows just three at a time.

"That doesn't make a whole lot of sense, considering that we are a relatively small metropolitan area," he said. "I don't know what you would do if you live in a big city (with more hospitals)."

Information from the 10-question survey, released in March, came from overnight patients at hospitals around the country — 300 from each hospital.

The site, created a few years ago, previously posted information on 26 patient safety markers, such as proper administering of antibiotics and steps taken to prevent blood clotting after surgery. That information was collected by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

While the customer satisfaction portion of the survey is easy enough to understand, Ruoff said, the rest of the information on medical care doesn't give consumers a good sense of what the consequences are if a certain thing is or isn't done.

"The (explanatory) notes are not exactly in plain English," he said.

He also found it befuddling that the site claims that Palmetto Health Richland — which has the area's only Level I trauma center — does not offer emergency services.

Patient safety advocate Helen Haskell said she wishes there were more on outcomes such as deaths, complications and infections picked up in a hospital.

Technically, hospitals voluntarily release the information to the Health and Human Services department.

But if they don't, they face losing out on payment increases from Medicare and Medicaid.

"So we have pretty high reporting rates," said Don McLeod, spokesman for the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Almost 3,000 hospitals around the country send in customer satisfaction information, and more than 5,000 report on patient care.

The numbers are updated quarterly — the next time will be at the beginning of July.

But even with frequent updating, the information is not "real time." There is at least a nine-month lag between when hospitals turn in their information and when it goes up on the Web. That includes 30 days that hospitals get to review — but not change — their profiles before the public sees them. The latest data now on the Web is from mid-2007.

Program administrators hope to shorten the lag time, even as more measures, including one next month on deaths from pneumonia, are added.

Quality and safety czar Stinson hopes that as the latest information gets added, his hospitals will look better and better.

At Palmetto Health, the writing is literally on the wall about changes in patient care: each unit has hallway poster boards that list goals and progress under headings such as care quality care and customer service.

And staffers don't just put up the good stuff.

As patients walk by, they can look at graphs tracking the number of patient falls, infections picked up, pneumonia cases caused by a ventilator or the number of people affected when staffers didn't follow protocol after heart surgery.

"I don't think we can emphasize enough what a sea change this is," said Dr. Ellis Knight, vice president of Medical Affairs at Palmetto Health. "This is brand new to all health care. In the past, we would never let patients know we have falls or that people don't wash their hands properly."

Managers have to shepherd changes in their units and answer to higher-ups for unmet goals.

"It's a change in the mindset from being defensive to being really honest about it and making sure patients get the best care possible," said heart surgeon Dr. Scott Petit, who has spearheaded successful quality improvement programs at Palmetto Health.

Such accountability means doctors and other staffers can no longer focus narrowly on their area of expertise but must look at how what they do fits with the broader goals of improving patient care.

"It's putting system engineering into medicine," Petit said. "It's a rethinking of our culture."

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