

Area hospitals pass muster in new mortality rate study

Hospital officials warn that study can be misread

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WASHINGTON — Death rates for Medicare patients at three Santa Cruz County hospitals last year were about what the government expected given the patients they treat, a report released here Thursday shows.

The seven-volume study listing actual and expected mortality rates at almost 6,000 hospitals nationwide was prepared by the Health Care Financing Administration. The report covers hospital-by-hospital death rates for elderly and disabled patients covered by Medicare, broken down by 16 different categories of illnesses and conditions.

Hospital industry representatives tried unsuccessfully to block release of a similar report last year, charging that it would be misleading to the public. Opposition continued this year, but HCFA, saying the report was useful, made it available anyway. The agency, however, included lengthy disclaimers warning consumers and the press not to misread it.

HCFA officials stressed that the data should not be used as a consumer guide for picking hospitals. Rather, they said, it is intended to be used by hospital administrators and physicians as only one tool in reviewing care at the institutions.

Meanwhile, the report was accompanied by warnings from two Santa Cruz County hospital administrators that the data could not be used to judge quality of care.

Overall mortality rates at all three area hospitals — AMI Community Hospital of Santa Cruz, Dominican Santa Cruz Hospital and Watsonville Community Hospital — fell within the predicted range, the report showed.

AMI and Watsonville both had overall mortality rates of 11 percent, according to the report. The HCFA put the predicted death rate between 9 percent and 17 percent.

Dominican had an overall death rate of 13 percent, falling within the predicted range of 10 percent to 17 percent set for the facility, according to the federal report.

"Consumers should use this information to ask questions of their physicians, not to reach judgements about the quality of care in a particular hospital," federal officials advised. "The report is not a guide for consumers to compare mortality rates of one hospital versus another."

Federal officials said the information can help identify "potential problems." The HCFA acknowl-

edged hospitals with mortality rates exceeding the predicted range are "more likely to have quality problems than other hospitals."

But the agency added hospitals with higher death rates may be "fine institutions with unusually sick patients." The data did not account for the condition of a patient at the time of admission, officials noted.

In Santa Cruz County, hospital death rates fell within predicted ranges for the 16 different categories of conditions and illnesses — ranging from heart disease to cancer — with these exceptions:

— The mortality rate for cancer and for low-risk heart disease at AMI Community Hospital of Santa Cruz actually fell slightly below the predicted death rate ranges. The death rate for 60 cancer patients there was 8 percent, while the expected range was 9 to 31 percent. Meanwhile, the death rate for 79 patients with low-risk heart disease was 0 percent, while the predicted range was 2 percent to 13 percent.

— The death rate for cancer, renal disease, urological problems and low-risk heart disease at Watsonville Community Hospital fell slightly below predicted ranges, while the rate for stroke victims fell slightly above. The actual rates follow, with predicted ranges in parentheses: cancer, 12 percent (13-34 percent); stroke, 44 percent (15-41 percent); renal disease, 0 percent (8-66 per-

cent); urology, 0 percent (1-14 percent); and low-risk heart disease, 1 percent (2-11 percent). (Officials explained the fewer the number of cases, the wider the range may be; the larger number of cases, the more narrow the range can be.)

In a response included in the report, Paul A. Estess, Watsonville hospital chief executive officer, said officials there "believe that quality can only be evaluated through a rigorous (medical) peer review program, not through statistical comparisons."

The hospital uses such data in that review, but, he added, "No other accurate conclusions can be drawn from these data, and in fact, consumers may be misled by it... (T)here are better standards to measure quality than raw mortality data."

Ann Klein, executive director of AMI Community Hospital of Santa Cruz, also said the data are used as a part of a "quality assurance process because they enable identification of opportunities to improve care, based on in-depth peer review."

But she also warned against "using simple rates for judging the quality of care provided by different facilities."

HCFA said the Dominican Santa Cruz Hospital, whose mortality rates for all diagnostic categories fell within predicted ranges without exception, filed no written response.

Two men hurt in Watsonville accident

WATSONVILLE — Two men were hurt, one seriously, after their car missed a curve on Coward Road, became airborne and landed on its roof, the California Highway Patrol said.

The CHP said that Samuel Martinez Velazquez, 38, of San Jose was speeding in the rain when he drove his Pontiac Firebird off the road. He sustained a punctured lung

and multiple broken bones in the accident. He was cited for drunken driving, the CHP said.

A passenger in the car, Jesus D. Candella, 34, of San Antonio, Texas sustained cuts and bruises.

Velazquez was removed from the intensive care unit at Watsonville Community Hospital Thursday, and released.

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