

Deaths plague even top hospitals

August 8 2011, By Steve Sternberg and Christopher Schnaars, USA Today

More than 120 hospitals given top marks by patients for providing excellent care also have a darker distinction: high death rates for heart attack, heart failure or pneumonia, a USA Today analysis of new Medicare data has found.

Experts say the newspaper's analysis of data released today by Medicare offers a window into the relationship between patients' perceptions of the quality of their hospital care and more objective measures, such as hospitals' death and [readmission rates](#).

"This is a very important finding," says Donald Berwick, director of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, adding that though patient-survey data offer critical insights into how it feels to be a patient at different hospitals, patients' perceptions don't tell the whole story.

Over the past decade, rising costs and a flood of complex therapies have prompted patients, employers, insurers and the federal government to demand public disclosure of health care data. Armed with this evidence, Berwick says, doctors, insurers and patients themselves can make better choices about where to obtain medical care.

The challenge is to measure hospitals accurately. Experts still debate what measures to use, says John Wennberg, founding editor of the Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care and author of *Tracking Medicine: A Researcher's Quest to Understand Health Care*.

Medicare's analysis of more than 4,600 hospitals found that 323, or one of every 14, had above-average [death rates](#) for [heart attack](#), heart failure or pneumonia. Two - Piedmont Medical Center in Rock Hill, S.C., and Southwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center in Macomb - had high death rates in all three categories. Thirteen had low death rates across the board.

Veterans Administration hospitals performed well, according to data released for the first time this year. Ten hospitals had lower death rates than average for heart failure; two were lower for heart attacks; and five for pneumonia.

All VA hospitals were as good as or better than the national rate for heart attack and [heart failure](#).

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