

## Consumers scratch heads as insurers, hospital groups and Medicare offer varied ratings: Spread of medical 'report cards' called confusing

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Medicare has expanded its website giving consumers information on hospital price and quality, signaling that medical "report cards" are continuing to expand. But critics contend such ratings still fail to provide measures that people can easily understand and use. And hospitals, doctors and advocacy groups alike say the very proliferation of measurement programs is confusing health-care consumers. "It seems like everyone and his brother wants to do a report card," said [Washington State Hospital Association](#) spokeswoman Cassie Sauer.

Medicare launched its Hospital Compare website in 2005 and recently expanded it to provide 21 quality measures, up from the original 10. This gives consumers information they need to know, said Michael Marchand, Seattle public affairs director for Medicare.

Locally, meanwhile, the [nonprofit Puget Sound Health Alliance](#), comprising 140 organizations, plans within the next few months to publish its first quality report on major physician clinics. "The report will be based on more comprehensive information than anyone has ever compiled in this state, gathered from all the major health plans," said Diane Giese, the alliance's communication director.

Other organizations produce report cards, too. [Premera Blue Cross](#) has published several on physician clinics. The Washington State Hospital Association in January began publishing hospital quality reports at [wahospitalquality.org](#). And The Leapfrog Group, which includes national corporations, provides hospital ratings in a format adapted from Consumer Reports.

"Health care has been one of the most closed, mysterious and expensive sectors of our economy," Giese said, "and the process of shining a light on what is happening with safe, effective health care with affordability is very new." But some say that light is too diffuse. Hospitals, said Giese, want "one report, not one more report." [Virginia Mason Medical Center](#) spokeswoman Kim Davis said the various reports are burdensome for hospitals -- and may confuse consumers. [Virginia Mason, she said, as a member of the Puget Sound Health Alliance, is "participating in broad discussions of one report card in the future."](#)

Doctors feel the same way. The **Washington State Medical Association** would like to see development of a standardized quality report. Instead, competing health insurers have each devised their own, since each has only claims data for its own enrollees. This, says the medical association, has caused headaches for doctors and has forced consumers to wade through different measurements in different formats. Doctors also are concerned about the accuracy of report cards, said Dr. Hugh Maloney, president of the state medical association. They want a process whereby physicians can check the data before reports are made to the public. "We don't have an argument with the concept of measurement," Maloney added. "That horse is out of the barn."

Consumer advocates have weighed in, as well. "The fact that (Medicare) has a website and is publicly reporting data is a step in the right direction. Having said that, there's definitely room for improvement," said Deven McGraw, chief operating officer at the National Partnership for Women & Families, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit advocacy organization. It's not useful, for instance, to report on cardiac surgery outcomes, she said, because people suffering heart attacks can't take the time to study various hospitals. Instead, McGraw said, reports should feature information about such things as obstetric care and rates of complications. Report cards should make comparisons easy to understand, she said. For instance, they might feature star ratings. "These are the kinds of reports we'd like to see in the future," McGraw said, "though any reporting is a step in the right direction."

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