

Patients can compare hospital costs online

By Carol M. Ostrom, Seattle Times staff reporter, January 29, 2007

The Washington State Hospital Association is making it easier for patients to compare the prices and quality of the state's hospitals -- by simply looking online. By going to www.wsha.org, you could find out, for example, that Swedish Medical Center charges roughly twice what Overlake Hospital Medical Center does for a type of heart-bypass operation on average -- \$132,192 compared with \$66,628.

Or you might learn that Kirkland's Evergreen Healthcare and Auburn Regional Medical Center are above state and national averages for giving discharge instructions to heart-failure patients so they can better manage their conditions. You'd also see that Swedish and Overlake provide such discharge instructions less than a quarter of the time, according to the Web site.

"Reliable information allows patients and purchasers to make informed decisions about where they choose to seek care," said Leo Greenawalt, hospital association president. "It also helps policymakers and the public measure the cost and quality of hospital care."

The effort is one of many local and national attempts at "transparency" in the health-care industry. This year, for example, the **Puget Sound Health Alliance**, a consortium of insurers, providers and businesses, plans to release a report comparing clinics and hospitals on quality of care in five areas such as heart disease, diabetes and back pain.

The new Washington State Hospital Association Web site was created in response to repeated requests from state lawmakers for more hospital-specific data, hospital association officials said. All of the information was already publicly available but not easy to find. Cost information is collected by the state, some in a Department of Health database known as CHARS (Comprehensive Hospital Abstract Reporting System). And information is voluntarily reported to the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and is available at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov/.

"It's public information, and has been forever," said Larry Hettick, hospital-data manager for the Department of Health. "[The hospital association] paid someone to pretty it up and make it look nice." But, he added: "They did a good job."

But there are caveats:

- Patients won't be able to figure out what they would pay out of pocket, unless they happen to be paying cash. The prices listed are the undiscounted prices as billed in 2005, not the prices that insurance companies have negotiated. For out-of-pocket costs, patients will have to consult their individual insurers.
- On the hospital association Web site, patients also can't find out much about certain topics -- for example, hospital-acquired infections.
- Occasionally, a hospital posts erroneous information, and the site will be updated much less often than the state CHARS database.
- To get some price information for some specific procedures, you may need to know a special DRG (diagnosis-related group) code. You can get that from your insurer or by searching on the Internet.

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Cost comparison

Average prices at various hospitals for one type of coronary-bypass operation as listed on the Washington State Hospital Association Web site:

Hospital	Cost
Swedish Medical Center	\$132,192
Providence Everett Medical Center	\$83,159
Northwest Hospital & Medical Center	\$75,799
University of Washington Medical Center	\$67,416
Overlake Hospital Medical Center	\$66,628
Virginia Mason Medical Center	\$54,620