

## Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Experts Weigh In on Why Few Patients Use Hospital and Physician Rating Websites

Report/Produced by: Mina Kim  
Publication: *iHealthBeat*  
Date Posted: November 17, 2010

### Text:

Physician and hospital rating websites haven't caught on in a big way yet despite more and more of these sites cropping up in recent years. However, experts say their popularity will grow. This is a special report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Mina Kim.

According to physician Tara Lagu, 94% of U.S. residents are unaware of CMS' hospital quality reporting site, called Hospital Compare. Lagu is a researcher at the Center for Quality Care Research at the Baystate Medical Center and assistant professor at Tufts University. She says one of the reasons for low use of such sites is that people tend to rely on hospital recommendations from doctors or family members. Another reason is that data on the site are complicated and not always relevant to the types of medical conditions people are interested in.

***(Lagu): "If you think about what's on Hospital Compare right now, its process measures, it's if you have a heart attack, what percentage of patients who had a heart attack got an aspirin, right? Additionally, if you think about if you're having a heart attack, it's pretty unlikely that you're going to go online and choose your hospital."***

Lagu and her colleagues recently published a commentary article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that calls on the site to include open-ended feedback from patients, similar to the way travel websites invite feedback about hotel stays. She says public opinion can provide useful information that process and outcome measures, and random surveys miss.

***(Lagu): "One of my research colleagues was pregnant and was looking for the hospital where she wanted to deliver her baby. And, she said 'I tried to go online and find out where I should deliver my baby and there just really wasn't a lot of info about the quality of obstetrical care. And more importantly, I really care about, what was the experience of women who went to have their baby at hospital X, Y or Z.'"***

Lagu also suggests that the site allow hospitals to respond to patient feedback. She says CMS should study the success of NHS Choices, a website

from the U.K., which includes patient reviews on hospital services, as well as physician rating websites. She says most reviews on these sites are positive, with criticism directed more at staff courtesy or parking problems.

Physician rating sites aren't being widely used either, says Elizabeth McGlynn, associate director of the Santa Monica-based think tank RAND Health. She says similar to choosing a hospital, people tend to go to friends, other doctors or their health plans for physician referrals. In addition, the market for physician ratings is often limited to people who have moved to a new area or changed jobs and have different insurance.

McGlynn adds that those who do try ratings sites could be turned off by widely varying reviews of physicians. Some sites use clinical care and cost to determine a doctor's rating, while others use interpersonal skills. She says the lack of uniform criteria lends itself to one site measuring a doctor favorably, while another shows negative reviews.

***(McGlynn): "If a consumer looks at multiple sites and finds different signals about how good a doctor or hospital or nursing home is, then they're likely to dismiss all together the utility of that information. And that's unfortunate, particularly if one is really quite a good website and that is information that somebody should rely on."***

McGlynn says users have a variety of preferences for how information is conveyed. Some want detailed summaries, while others want a one, two or three star rating. Therefore, she says sites should differentiate and compete in their usability and navigability.

The American Medical Association has expressed concerns over the accuracy, transparency and reliability of physician rating sites. In a statement, the group argued that anonymous ratings offer no guarantee that reviews are even coming from a physician's patient.

McGlynn says some of the concerns are reasonable, but the physician community should propose a better way forward.

***(McGlynn): "People need this information. It's not unreasonable for them to ask, so join the effort to develop valid ways of assessing your performance, so become part of the solution instead of complaining about what's out there."***

McGlynn says the use of online physician ratings systems will only grow as health plans, employers and everyday consumers work to control medical costs. And, there's no shortage of sites eager to meet those needs, from RateMDs.com to Vitals.com.

Another website, ZocDoc.com, lets users scan doctor reviews and book appointments online instantly. Karsten Vagner, ZocDoc's recruiting director,

says more users are booking appointments with doctors who have reviews than doctors who don't.

***(Vagner): "Well, we have about a quarter of a million people using our site a month, and I'd say that growth, people making appointments with doctors who have reviews on our site, it's in the double digits month over month."***

Who are the people most likely to use physician and hospital rating sites? A study released by the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life in June 2009 found that women, younger internet users, and those with higher levels of income and education are more likely to go online for ratings about doctors and medical facilities.

This has been a special report for iHealthBeat, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at [iHB@CHC.org](mailto:iHB@CHC.org). I'm Mina Kim, thanks for listening.