Having Patient Satisfaction Data Isn't Enough To Choose A Hospital

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When I learned recently that I would need cataract surgery, I researched New York City hospital ratings from three well-known sponsors: *US News & World Report*, the federal government's Hospital Compare and the Leapfrog Group. After writing about what I discovered [1], I wondered if perhaps a few measures might offer a clue or two about how to better honcho some of my care, like the one that asks hospital patients if a nurse explained medications given to them. Since many ratings schemes rely on patient satisfaction data collected by the government, I decided to explore further, still hoping to uncover the best facility for my surgery.

The Hospital Compare site — an investment of millions of public dollars — offers many ways to judge how happy patients have been with their hospital experience. You can learn whether doctors and nurses communicate well, if the area around a patient room is noisy at night, if the bathrooms are always clean and the percentage of patients who would rate their hospital 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale. Should consumers rely on these numbers? What do they say and don't say?

I posed these questions to Mark Schlesinger, a professor of public health at Yale who researches medical consumerism and health quality measurement. I also wanted to know what satisfaction measures were specifically focused on eye surgery. "They don't exist," Schlesinger said and went on to explain that this was partly due to some ongoing tension among researchers.

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