Left Wondering

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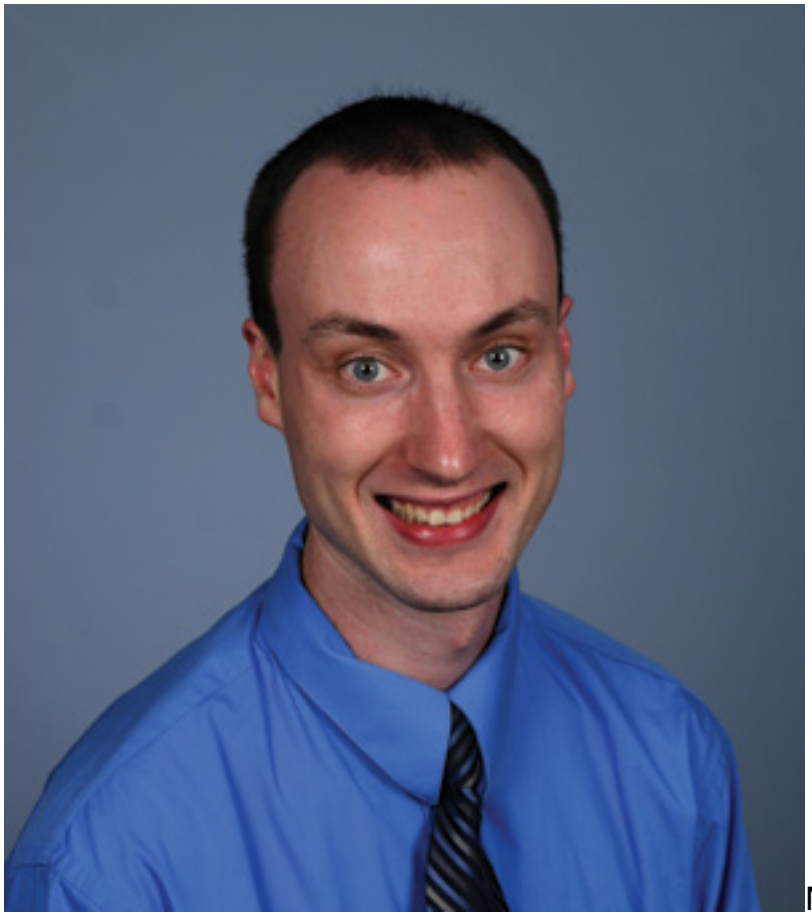

No recent internet headline or cleverly-worded web teaser caused me to click my computer mouse on it faster than one that linked to a video discussing a Consumer Reports study on hospital safety.

Strangely enough, it wasn't the subject matter that grabbed my attention. It was the tone of the headline: "Hospitals Get Low Safety Scores In New Study."

The subjects in the video discussed a piece released by Consumer Reports that looked at more than 2,000 hospitals with an eye on hospital-acquired infections, re-admission rates, lack of communication around medications and discharges, the overuse of CT scans, and rate of complications. On a scale of 0-100, the average score came out to be 49, the highest score was 74, and the lowest score was 14. To make matters worse, almost two-thirds of the nation's 258 teaching hospitals that report enough data for Consumer Reports to calculate a safety score ranked below average.

The grand takeaway?

"Hospitals are a dangerous place to be," noted Dr. John Santa, the director of Consumer Reports' Health Ratings Center in a recent appearance on CBS This

Morning.

My takeaway, however, was different. The video left me pondering a number of questions. But more than anything, I wondered how Consumer Reports got its information, about the methodology behind the study, and how different aspects of safety were weighted in the final score for each facility.

It only two a few more clicks of the computer mouse to find some answers.

The ratings are more or less the numerical reflection of information on the following aspects: safety, patient outcome, patient experience, and hospital practices. The last factor includes two separate measures. These are the use of electronic health records and the appropriate use of scanning.

Some of this comes from billing information and other administrative data submitted by hospitals to Medicare. Information on infections is reported by individual states, and that data comes from “a somewhat different set of intensive care units and surgical procedures, and different time periods.”

Perhaps what’s most interesting about the data collection is how Consumer Reports describes its limitations: “Unlike most other Consumer Reports Ratings, we don't collect the data in our Hospital Ratings ourselves, so there may be issues with quality we can't control,” its website says.

Hmmm…

There’s no question hospital safety was, is, and will be a critical issue to every entity associated with the healthcare industry. While a study like this is a helpful reminder of that fact, it fails to offer much of anything else of value because there is no telling how much issues with consistency and quality of data affect the ratings. As a result, it leaves its audience with more questions than answers.

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