

Glass Houses: Transparency Marches On

By Dustin Clark

Progress has been different in different states, but transparency in the price of medical procedures and the quality of physicians and facilities continues to spread. Commercial payers offer ways for consumers to compare education, ratings, performance, and pricing of physicians and their practices online, relatively easily, and sometimes even accurately. For some time, nearly 20 years, Medicare has offered a set of tools that allow their patients to make comparisons and review information related to physicians who accept Medicare. The most recent incarnation involves eight separate online sections divided by provider type. This month, a new tool called Care Compare combines all of those separate searches into one. It's easy to use, works very quickly, is supported by multiple platforms (phones, tablets, desktops), and is easy to understand. As part of the eMedicare initiative launched by the Trump Administration in 2018, Care Compare makes it easy for Medicare patients to compare physicians and facilities before they commit to one. A consumer can go to one place, check on physicians, hospitals and nursing homes related to a procedure, and get enough information on all of them to make decisions about where to have procedures done, and who they want as their primary care provider.

Great, so, why is this important?

Medicare represents a significant portion of most practices' overall patient population. It waxes and wanes from specialty to specialty and location to location, but almost all physicians are affected by changes to Medicare policies. With the rollout of Care Compare, information about your physicians – their education, their training, their performance and pricing – is going to be available, and it can be easily displayed right next to the same information about other physicians in town. Patients can even use the Procedure Price Look Up to view the fees physicians are paid for the procedures they're having. With a few clicks, you can see how one practice stacks up against another. How far away are they? Where did their docs go to school? What performance data are they sharing with Medicare, and how are they scoring? What is their pricing like? It takes no time to find these answers and compare them. This should raise the question, "Is my information correct?" I can tell you now, it'll make a difference. When I picked a few doctors in my hometown to compare, there were marked differences in the data displayed. Both showed an indicator that they billed the pre-approved Medicare rate, to help keep out-of-pocket costs down for patients, with a big green checkmark next to it. Hard to miss, and it would definitely stand out if the practice billed their standard charges and had a red X there instead. One doctor showed the full, formal name of his medical school and graduation date, the other simply had a note that said "Graduated, 1996." Imagine you're the consumer/patient looking for a new physician...which one sounds better? One group reported performance data and the other did not, so there's one practice that appears to be actively engaged in improving their patient experience, while the other isn't. I'm sure the other group is just as dedicated, but they're not reporting the data, so it doesn't get listed. Even the group that did report performance data to CMS was only reporting for one measure – scoring only two stars out of five. Everyone is used to looking at ratings to help make decisions, and two stars would lead me to choose something else, if this was Amazon.

As more practices participate with CMS' programs, and more data becomes available, how will your practice look if you have nothing to show? Is the information being displayed fully and correctly? Have you left anything out? Are you possibly being passed over just because of an administrative oversight? Tools like Care Compare are making it more important than ever to ensure you're putting your best face forward.

A substantial portion of most practice's patient population just received a tool to make it quick and easy to compare doctors, hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, surgery centers - what will they see when they pull your record? If you don't know, it's probably time to look. Catch up on those updates you've been meaning to send, review those performance programs you've thought about participating in. Patients will be choosing doctors in much the same way as other consumers make choices. As transparency measures continue to replace solid walls with glass ones, you'll need to be confident that what you're showing the world is the best representation of your practice.