



Albany Med gets a poor rating

Statewide hospital report card also puts St. Peter's and Ellis on honor roll

By Cathleen F. Crowley, Staff Writer

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Albany Medical Center Hospital, once again, earned low marks on a statewide report card for hospitals, while St. Peter's and Ellis hospitals made the honor roll.

The report card, sponsored by the Niagara Health Quality Coalition and the Alliance for Quality Health Care, found that mortality rates at Albany Med were higher than average for patients suffering from acute strokes and iatrogenic pneumothorax (air surrounding the lungs), and the hospital had higher occurrences of infections and postoperative pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lungs).

Albany Med's low rating for strokes comes just weeks after American Stroke Association honored the hospital for following treatment protocols.

Albany Med attributed the bad grades to poor record keeping. The hospital has routinely underrepresented how ill patients were, skewing risk-adjusted report cards like this one, said Greg McGarry, the hospital's spokesman.

Bruce Boissonnault, president and chief executive of Niagara Health Quality Coalition, said his group's study looks at mortality and occurrence rates, rather

than whether the hospitals follow the right procedures.

"Consumers want to know where do I have the best chance of surviving," Boissonnault said. "This is what people care about."

The contradicting evaluations underscore how difficult it is for consumers to decide the best place for treatment. Boissonnault suggested patients use the report card as a springboard for asking questions of their doctors.

Niagara Health is a nonprofit corporation based in western New York and the Alliance for Quality Health Care is a coalition of more than 2,000 businesses and health insurance providers. The annual study, which is available at <http://www.myhealthfinder.com>, also found that:

Infections are a problem. In addition to Albany Med, St. Clare's Hospital in Schenectady, St. Mary's Hospital in Troy and Saratoga Hospital all earned below average marks for the number of patients who caught infections during their hospital stays. No hospital in the Capital Region earned three stars, the highest mark.

Small hospitals are performing some complex surgeries at low volumes,

Continues on back

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despite medical evidence that hospitals performing high volumes have better outcomes.

Albany Med leaders said they started doubting the report cards' accuracy after a couple gave the hospital poor grades.

"One cardiac report card suggested that Ellis (Hospital) patients had a higher predicted mortality rate than ours," said Dr. Steven Frich, Albany Med's general director. "That just didn't make sense."

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The report card from Niagara Health released this week, for example, adjusts the risk factor for patients based on the administrative records.

Last year, Albany Med hired 3M Health Information Systems, based in Salt Lake City, to review its coding process. The consultants found that the coders were doing a good job, but the doctors were omitting key words from the medical charts.

For example, a clinician may have noted a patient in the intensive care unit was breathing rapidly, had a low blood-oxygen level and was on a ventilator, but did not explicitly write "acute respiratory failure."

"The coders are not allowed to be intuitive," Frich said. "They can only work off the words in the chart."

The consultants told hospital leaders that conditions were underrepresented by a factor of 20 percent. The hospital is now working with doctors and nurse managers to make sure the full diagnosis appears in the chart, he said.

The data not only influence report cards, but they affect how much a hospital is reimbursed. "Upcoding," the practice of inflating the severity of a patient's illness, is a danger, but the government regularly audits hospital records, Frich said.

Many hospitals across the state and in the Capital Region, have already consulted experts and hired managers to make sure records are completed and filled out properly.

"Everyone is trying to get it right, to claim as much credit as they can for the work they are doing," he said.

However, it will take years for Albany Med's efforts to show up in the report cards, which generally rely on 2-year-old data.

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Health Information Systems

575 West Murray Boulevard
Salt Lake City, UT 84123
U.S.A.
800.367.2447
www.3Mhis.com

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