

Indianapolis Star

Estimated printed pages: 3

June 22, 2007

Section: NEWS

Edition: FINAL EDITION

Page: A01

Hoosiers' hearts are in capable hands

St. Vincent Heart Center stands out, U.S. assessment finds

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Your chances of surviving a heart attack or heart failure in Indiana's hospitals are about as good as they are anywhere else in the country.

Almost all of the state's -- and the nation's -- hospitals received an "average" ranking in the federal government's first-ever assessment of cardiac death rates made public.

Only one area hospital stood out from the crowd.

St. Vincent Heart Center of Indiana was the only hospital in the state to perform above average when it comes to saving lives from heart attacks.

No hospital in the state was ranked as below average on death rates for either heart attacks or heart failure.

Heart attack is a blockage of blood flow to the heart, while heart failure tends to be a chronic, progressive weakening of the heart.

The federal government grouped hospitals into one of three categories when it came to the death rates: better, no different than, or worse than the national average.

The data were released Thursday at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov.

A number of local hospitals provided The Indianapolis Star with their specific statistics upon the paper's request. St. Vincent Heart Center of Indiana did not provide the data to The Star.

Death rates at large local hospitals for heart attack patients ranged from 11.9 percent at St. Francis to 17.9 percent at Community Hospitals North and East. The national average was about 16 percent.

Death rates for heart-failure patients ranged from 9.2 percent at Wishard Memorial Hospital to 12.9 percent at St. Francis. The national average was about 11 percent.

The government has been tracking certain measures of the quality of care, but the new data, for the first time, look at how those patients fare.

"This is really the first time we've had patient outcomes, which, at the end of the day, is what people care about," said Dr. Ashish Jha, an assistant professor at the Harvard School of Public Health.

The hospitals, which received more detailed performance reports, said the data may help provide information for a more thorough review of how to treat heart patients.

"I think it is a valuable process," said Dr. Eric Williams, of the Clarian Cardiovascular Center and Indiana University's Krannert Institute of Cardiology. "It also means that the doctors are going to focus on this, look at all of their databases closely and look for ways to improve."

Officials scored nearly 4,500 U.S. hospitals. For heart-attack death rates, only seven fell below the national average. Thirty-five hospitals were listed as performing worse than the average for treating heart failure.

Out of the 38 hospitals nationwide that performed better than average on heart failure, three were in Indiana: Methodist Hospitals in Gary, Community Hospital in Munster and St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago.

St. Vincent Heart, at 106th and North Meridian streets, was one of 17 in the country considered better than average at heart-attack rates.

Dr. William Storer, medical director, said the hospital focuses on cardiac care and emphasizes interventional techniques that save lives.

"We can do that fast -- and the speed with which you can intervene directly relates to their morbidity and mortality," he said.

Mike Leavitt, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said releasing the data is the first step in prompting quality improvements at the nation's hospitals.

He predicted that within the next decade, more specific outcomes and quality data for a variety of conditions will be widely available.

Consumers may want to view the new data as a starting point, not the final word, on where to seek care, said Dr. Lakshmi Halasyamani, vice chair for the department of medicine at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, Mich., who wrote a recent article about hospital rankings.

"The important piece is that people don't panic and think they have to rush to the two hospitals that have the lowest mortality rates," Halasyamani said. "You want to use this as one piece of information in a dashboard of data points to help guide you in the choices you make."

Studies show, however, that consumers have been slow to embrace the information available to them.

Experience with other information sources, such as listing cardiac surgery outcomes, suggests patients tend to ignore this data, said Harvard's Jha, who has studied the topic. Instead, they tend to rely on word of mouth or other sources to make health choices.

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354.

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