

Is Quality in the Eye of the Beholder?

HSPH Student Orientation – Practicing Public Health Workshop 8/28/13

- Read the 2 page case to understand the situation.
- Assume the role of Linda Conrad, the daughter of Albert Brown
- Albert Brown lives in Wayne, Pennsylvania and needs heart valve surgery. He is looking to you for advice.
- Before arriving at the workshop on 8/28/13, please take some time to research the information available on the Internet indicated in each of the 7 sources referenced in the case. We will be discussing the relative value of the types of information provided by each source.
- Where you would recommend your father go for care and what factors were of most importance in making that decision?
- What other information would you like to have? What were the challenges in making a recommendation?

Lisa Conrad was unsure what to do. Her 72 year old father, Albert Brown, an avid tennis player and non-smoker, had been fatigued frequently recently to the point of losing his interest in any exercise. She finally convinced him to go to his doctor, who referred him on to a cardiologist. The diagnosis was a severely leaking heart valve that needed replacement to restore his health.

When she joined her father for his next visit, the cardiologist referred Mr. Brown to the local hospital, for a heart valve replacement. Her father, a somewhat typical senior citizen, wasn't about to question the choice of hospitals because he would never question what his doctor said. Lisa wasn't so sure. As a small business lender for a local bank, she was used to doing detailed analysis before making a loan and carried that approach over to her personal life, wanting to look at the facts before making important decisions.

She wondered what could be more important than making sure her father received the best care possible? Should her father go to the local community hospital for the valve replacement surgery or to a downtown teaching hospital? Or maybe he should get on a plane to go to the best hospital in the region? What factors should they consider in comparing the care delivered by different hospitals? She recalled reading a newspaper article recently talking about the high level of errors in hospitals and encouraging the readers to be more proactive in managing their health care.

She knew as a lender that all restaurants or car dealers were not alike. She would only lend to those that had strong business fundamentals, had the right processes in place and had good results. Did the same apply to the choice of hospitals, or were they all pretty much the same? Could she really get the information to compare the quality of the hospitals or should she just trust the cardiologist's knowledge and recommendation?

She decided to get on the Internet and see what she could find. She remembered reading something in US News & World Report about best hospitals in particular clinical specialties. She searched and found their most recent hospital ranking report at <http://health.usnews.com/best-hospitals/rankings>. She also recalled that the local hospital had a banner out front touting them as a top 100 hospital, so she went to that site at <http://www.100tophospitals.com>. Her employer was part of an industry group called The Leapfrog Group. She located their web site at <http://www.leapfroggroup.org>.

When she searched for the phrase “check hospital quality”, she came up with a site called Quality Check from the Joint Commission for Hospital Accreditation (JCAHO) at <http://www.qualitycheck.org/consumer/searchQCR.aspx> and another site for Healthgrades at <http://www.healthgrades.com>. She also found that the federal government had a site that provided comparative hospital information on process, outcome, structural and patient satisfaction measures at <http://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare/search.html>. Finally, while her father was covered under Medicare, she recalled getting a newsletter from her employer that mentioned a hospital comparison tool from WebMD that was available on her health plan’s web site. She accessed that site at <http://tufts.sqctool.com/index.aspx?f=tuftsdemo>.

She was quite surprised at how much information she was able to find so quickly on the Internet, but wasn’t sure how best to use it. And she had a lot of questions.

- How much emphasis should she place on the reputation of the hospital? On how big it was, or whether it was a teaching hospital?
- Was it better to look at the hospital’s overall performance or its results for the valve replacement surgery that her father needed?
- How important were number of patients treated, patient mortality rate, likelihood of complications or length of time in the hospital?
- How about the experience of other patients at a particular hospital?
- Should financial factors play a role in the decision?
- Should she focus more on whether the hospital was following the right practices or on the results it actually achieved?

She also decided to ask around to see what her friends in the area thought the best choice would be. Half of her friends suggested the local community hospital, the other half the major downtown teaching hospital. At the last minute, she called some of her former business school classmates who lived in other nearby cities, and they recommended Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and Mass General in Boston.

When she mentioned the idea of going out of state to her father (an old time baseball fan), he remembered that Ted Williams went to the New York-Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City with a similar problem years ago. Her father said that Ted always had better vision than anyone else in baseball.

She was going to stop by at her father’s house to talk over the weekend, so she had a lot of analysis and thinking to do in the meantime.