

Four Ways Data is Transforming Your Health

By Jamie Elizabeth Rosen, Editor, *Real World Health Care* | May 14, 2014

The increasing availability of data about health care in the U.S. is empowering patients to take charge of their care and quietly revolutionizing how patients are treated. Last month, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services [released data](#) on which services were provided by over 880,000 health care providers, how many times each service was provided, and what the providers charged. Yesterday, [top health and technology experts](#) for the federal government and the Brookings Institution gathered to discuss how the growing catalogue of [public health care data](#) is leading to profound improvements in America's health care. The event was hosted by Brookings' [Engelberg Center for Health Care Reform](#) in collaboration with [1776 DC's Challenge Festival](#).

Here are the top four ways that data transparency is already beginning to transform Americans' health. The benefits are expected to grow as the data is analyzed, matched with other sources, and organized into user-friendly and accessible formats.

1. **Selecting the best doctor**

When Farzad Mostashari learned that his mother needed an epidural steroid injection, he wanted to find out which orthopedic surgeon was the best at this specific procedure. So he searched the millions of medical claims recently released by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to discover which providers were the most experienced in this procedure.

An interesting result emerged. "There is one provider who does more than everyone else combined," said Mostashari, who is a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution, where he is focused on payment reform and delivery system transformation. "He's probably pretty good."



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As health care data increasingly becomes available, patients will have more information to make the most rational decisions for their health care, said Kavita Patel, a physician and fellow in the Economic Studies program and managing director for clinical transformation and delivery at the Engelberg Center.

Patel asks her patients why they choose to see her. “Nobody’s ever said: ‘I looked up your quality scores and saw that your out-of-pocket costs are less than the average provider in your area,’” Patel said of her 12 years in medical practice. “This is one of the first times that everyone in this room can take out a laptop...and look at this data.”

Mostashari added that the data can be used to identify outliers. For instance, he found that while the average orthopedic surgeon performed controversial spinal fusion surgeries on 7 percent of the patients they saw, some did so on 35 percent. This knowledge empowers patients to choose providers that best align with their health care values and preferences.

2. Reducing costs

The newly-released CMS data enables comparisons of the prices different providers charge for the same services. This data reveals that in some cases providers charge [vastly different rates](#) to Medicare for the same services, Mostashari said. The *Wall Street Journal* provides a [consumer-friendly database](#) detailing the types of procedures, number of each, and costs per procedure charged by individual health care providers.

Last year’s release of hospital charges led some hospitals that were charging higher rates to uninsured and underinsured patients than their peers to seek advice from CMS. “Some hospital associations called us and said, ‘We want to change. Help us develop new accounting practices to set prices more fairly for those who are uninsured or underinsured,’” said Jonathan Blum, Principal Deputy Administrator at CMS.

The ability to access and analyze a growing amount of data on procedures performed and their outcomes also helps patients and providers avoid low value services and make decisions about the relative risks and benefits of different procedures. Patel pointed out an ABIM Foundation initiative called [Choosing Wisely](#) that equips providers and patients with [lists of procedures](#) that should be

carefully considered and discussed to ensure that care is supported by evidence, not duplicative, free from harm, and truly necessary.

3. Promoting accountability

When health care providers know that their records will be publically available for scrutiny, they are incentivized to ensure that they won't be embarrassed by what people find. This can profoundly change which procedures providers choose. For instance, one analysis revealed a wide disparity between the percentage of black versus white patients who were tested for cholesterol levels. "Simply asking providers how often they were doing [cholesterol tests], without any payment incentive," removed this disparity, said Darshak Sanghavi, the Richard Merkin fellow and a managing director of the Engelberg Center. "This is one example of how simple transparency can improve health care and ultimately save lives."

4. Expediting spread of best practices

Jonathan Blum, Principal Deputy Administrator at CMS, has seen data transparency expedite the uptake of best practices by health care providers and public health authorities. For example, when analyzing the data on dialysis providers, CMS found that there was an uptick in blood transfusions by certain providers in specific geographic regions. "Our medical team got on the phone and called the dialysis providers and said: 'Did you know you are doing more blood transfusions than your peers?'" The result? Those providers decreased blood transfusions, improving health outcomes for their patients. The same pattern occurred for nursing home facilities that overused antipsychotic drugs.

"I want to convince folks that you can change policy, you can change procedures, you can make things safer," Blum said. "Data liberation can help us build [accountable care organizations], help us build better payment policies, help us reduce hospital readmissions. There is tremendous opportunity ahead for us."

Bryan Sivak, Chief Technology Officer at the Department of Health & Human Services, added that data transparency is affording entrepreneurs from outside the health care sector – such as startups [Aidin](#), [Purple Binder](#), and [Oscar](#) – the potential to transform the health care system.

“We’re sitting on the edge of an incredible moment in history,” he said.
“Everybody is looking at things in a different way because everybody understands that we have to do things differently.”

“Government data is a public good and a national asset,” said Claudia Williams, Senior Advisor for Health IT and Innovation for the U.S. CTO in the White House. “It’s something we have to release if we can to allow innovation and change.”

How do you make your health care decisions? Have you used any of these new tools?

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