

# Look for the Best Hospital Care

By Dan Markham

There are many times when a patient has no choice which hospital he or she may use. In cases of emergency, the nearest hospital is frequently the best hospital. Sometimes, your managed health plan may dictate which hospitals may be used. But there are times when you or your loved one has a planned admission to a hospital. And when that time arises, health organizations recommend careful thought should be put into that decision.

But how do you make that choice. The first criterion should always be quality. That is the conclusion of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), a federal agency devoted to improving the quality, safety, efficiency and effectiveness of health care for all Americans. The AHRQ says the quality of care provided by a hospital should be the driving force behind all health decisions.

Following is a helpful checklist that a consumer should consider these factors before committing to a hospital. The hospital should:

- Be accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.
- Be rated highly by state, consumer or other groups. Consumer groups publish guides in various cities. You may also call your state's department of health or similar organization for information. Additionally, feel free to ask your doctor for an opinion on area hospitals.
- Be covered by your health plan. If a preferred hospital is not covered by your plan, you may have to find another way to pay. Alternately, if you want to go to a certain hospital, you may need to find a doctor that has privileges at that hospital.
- Have experience with your condition. Some routine procedures may be performed at all hospitals. Specialty hospitals may have considerable experience with certain kinds of conditions or patients (such as children). You may also want to learn if a hospital has a team of specialists who work on your condition or treatment.
- Have success with your condition. Along those same lines, some hospitals enjoy better success rates with different types of procedures. A number of health departments and groups perform outcome studies, which demonstrate how well patients perform after different types of procedures, such as heart bypass surgery, are performed.
- Check and work to improve its quality of care. An increasing number of hospitals are working to improve the quality of care provided. Patient outcomes are one way of tracking success, as are patient injury and infection reports. Please ask the hospital's

quality management or assurance department how it monitors its quality of care. You may also request any patient satisfaction surveys the hospital has done.

Some of the questions you may ask are:

- Is the hospital conveniently located? Can you and your family get there easily for scheduled as well as emergency visits?
- Does the hospital have a written description of its services and fees? What resources does the hospital provide to help you find financial assistance if you need it?
- Is the hospital clean? Ask to take a walk around the waiting areas and patient care areas to see if it's the kind of place where you would want to be treated and recuperate?
- Does the hospital explain the patient's rights and responsibilities?
- Do you know who is responsible for maintaining your personal care plan? How are the involved practitioners kept informed about your specific care needs? Can you or your family be kept up-to-date on your medical care?
- Does the hospital have social workers? If so, what services do they perform?
- Will a discharge plan be developed for you before you leave the hospital? What will your primary care physician's involvement be in your recuperation?
- Does the hospital provide you with the necessary training to continue your care in your home after you've been discharged?

Knowing what to look for and what to ask will help you choose a facility that provides quality care and best meets your needs.