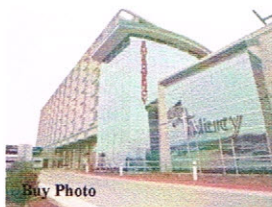


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Des Moines' Mercy penalized over patient-safety scores

Tony Leys, tleys@dmreg.com 3:40 p.m. CST December 23, 2016



(Photo: Tony Leys/Register file photo)

Des Moines' Mercy Medical Center is among seven Iowa hospitals being penalized by Medicare for relatively poor patient-safety scores.

The federal health-insurance program for the elderly announced this week (<http://khn.org/news/latest-hospital-injury-penalties-include-crackdown-on-antibiotic-resistant-germs/>) that it would withhold part of Medicare reimbursements to 769 hospitals nationwide. The penalties are part of an effort to rein in medical errors, which kill tens of thousands of Americans per year.

Mercy's penalty could top \$1 million. The hospital's leaders said Friday they disagree with the federal ratings.

"The scores do not represent our accomplishments, work or commitment to patient safety. They take into account only a select group of safety measures reported on a delayed basis," the hospital said in a prepared statement.

The patient-safety scores look at such things as avoidable infections, blood clots and pressure sores. The penalties amount to 1 percent of each hospital's Medicare money for the current fiscal year, which can add up to more than \$1 million for a large medical center.

"I think it gets their attention," said Paul Pietzsch, president of Health Policy Corporation of Iowa. Pietzsch's group, which is supported by employers and unions that buy health insurance, has been pushing for years to improve patient safety in Iowa hospitals.

The other Iowa hospitals being penalized are Covenant Medical Center in Waterloo, Genesis Medical Center in Davenport, Grinnell Regional Medical Center, Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames, Mercy Medical Center in Sioux City, and Trinity Hospital in Muscatine.

One of the main safety concerns in hospitals and nursing homes is the spread of deadly bacteria. Germs can quickly build up tolerance to antibiotics in health care facilities, because the drugs are so widely used there. Antibiotics kill most bacteria, but the few germs that survive the drugs then breed with each other and create new lines of drug-resistant offspring. Patients infected with the new strains of bacteria can lose limbs or die because antibiotics are unable to curb the damage.

Health care leaders have increasingly focused on the problem in recent years, and many hospitals have used stringent cleanliness measures and careful antibiotic practices to cut down on the number of drug-resistant infections among their patients. "Progress is being made, but there still is a long, long way to go – and the easy stuff has probably already been done," Pietzsch said. He said the best ways to encourage hospitals to keep improving are to let the public see how they're faring and to hit them in the wallet when they fail. The new Medicare penalties announced publicly this week do both things, he said.

Mercy officials said a recent study by the American Hospital Association and others suggests the rating system is "arbitrary in its penalizing of larger urban and teaching hospitals like Mercy Des Moines." The hospital's statement touted its efforts to prevent infections and other risks. "Mercy invests significant time, effort and resources at the state, regional and national level to improve patient safety."

This is the second year that Mercy has been penalized for its patient-safety scores, hospital spokesman Gregg Lagan said. He said the penalty for fiscal year 2016 was a bit more than \$1 million. He said Mercy's score was just over the line to trigger a penalty. He said he couldn't estimate how much the new penalty would cost the hospital in fiscal year 2017.

The penalties, which went into effect in 2015, are called for under the Affordable Care Act. Most small Iowa hospitals are exempted from the potential penalties, because they are designated as "critical access" hospitals that have relatively few patients.

Leaders of some of the other penalized Iowa hospitals said they also are committed to improving patient safety.

Karen Kiel Rosser, Mary Greeley Medical Center's vice president and quality improvement officer, said her hospital's penalty was related to a rise in

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hospital-acquired infections from August 2013 to June 2015.

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Rosser said in an email to the Register that Mary Greeley has not faced such penalties in the past, and that its staff is moving aggressively to deal with the issue. The steps have included making sure patients receive appropriate antibiotics that are given in the right way, she said. Also, she said, the hospital is providing frequent home visits for patients before and after surgeries. One of those visits, Mary Greeley staff members can help patients with bathing, changing bed linens and changing wound dressings. "These efforts are evidence-based and have been shown to help prevent infections," Rosser wrote.

Todd Linden, president of Grinnell Regional Medical Center, said Medicare's rating system "is very complicated and can be very confusing for the public."

Linden noted that his hospital also received a separate bonus from Medicare for high quality of care. The money attached to that award outweighs the loss of Medicare money for the patient-safety score, he said. Linden said the new patient-safety score includes types of infections over which hospitals have little control, such as those that happen after surgical patients go home. "We have focused on strengthening our discharge instructions and encouraged patients to be vigilant with their follow-up visits to their surgeons and on keeping their wounds clean," he said.

Linden added that Grinnell Regional has taken extra steps, such as using copper surfaces in patient rooms to counter bacteria. He added that the relatively low number of patients in his hospital could throw off statistics on quality of care.

Jim Hayes, president of Trinity Hospital in Muscatine, said his hospital is working with federal officials to address the issues raised in the rating system. "The safety and health of our patients is our top priority at UnityPoint Health – Trinity Muscatine," Hayes wrote in a statement to the Register. "We are always working to improve our patients' experiences and high level of care in order to provide the best outcome, every patient, every time."

Patient-safety scores

Federal experts combined several different measures into a composite patient-safety score. The scores go from 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst. Hospitals that ranked in the worst 25 percent nationally were penalized by Medicare. Here are the scores of the seven Iowa hospitals that were penalized:

Genesis Medical Center, Davenport, 6.61

Covenant Medical Center, Waterloo, 6.83

Mary Greeley Medical Center, Ames, 7.11

Mercy Medical Center, Des Moines, 7.13

Trinity Hospital, Muscatine, 7.7

Mercy Medical Center, Sioux City, 8.06

Grinnell Regional Medical Center, 8.15

Hospital ratings:

Consumers looking for information about quality of care at local hospitals can find an array of ratings online at [medicare.gov/hospitalcompare](http://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare) (<https://www.medicare.gov/hospitalcompare/search.html?>). The ratings, compiled by federal experts, include such things as patient satisfaction, preventable infections and readmissions, and the length of time it takes for emergency-room patients to be seen by a health professional. The site allows consumers to compare up to three hospitals at once on each measure.

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