Factors that Influence Patient Selection of an Orthopaedic Surgeon and Hospital

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SIGNIFICANCE: The growth of consumer-directed health plans has increased demand for information regarding the cost and quality of healthcare services, including total joint arthroplasty (TJA). However, the factors that influence patient choice of provider when pursuing elective orthopaedic care, such as TJA, are poorly understood.

INTRODUCTION: The growth of consumer-directed health plans has sparked increased demand for information regarding the cost and quality of healthcare services, including joint arthroplasty (TJA). As price transparency and outcomes assessment matures, a growing body of literature examines the way patients select health plans and primary care providers. However, the factors that influence patients’ choice of provider when pursuing elective orthopaedic care, such as TJA, are poorly understood. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence patients’ choice when selecting an orthopaedic surgeon and hospital for TJA.

METHODS: 251 patients who presented to either an academic or community-based orthopaedic practice for evaluation and management of their arthritic hip or knee completed validated surveys ranking (on a 1-5 Likert scale) the importance of a surgeon, hospital, and non-clinical. The survey consisted of 30 questions and was administered to pre-operative TJA patients at UCSF and Connecticut Joint Replacement Institute. Factors measured included: physician reputation (e.g., how often I would recommend a specific surgeon), hospital quality, and choice of hospital for coronary artery bypass graft surgery. Health Serv Res, 33(3 Pt 1): 447-66, 1998.

RESULTS: In decreasing order of importance, patients rated physician manner (4.68), physician quality (e.g., outcomes) (4.64), hospital (4.01), physician reputation (4.00), customer service (3.98) as most important when selecting a surgeon. Despite the importance of physician and hospital quality, patients expressed frustration in their ability to find useful information to compare quality and outcomes and hospitals that perform TJA. Patients indicated they had limited access to information on physician quality, whether or not the surgeon adheres to generally accepted performance standards, how frequently the surgeon performs the procedure compared to their peers, and the surgeon’s rate of surgical complications and reoperations.

DISCUSSION: Government, health plans, hospitals, and surgeons are eager to collect and provide data to guide patient decision-making, but it is not clear what information patients most value when choosing a surgeon. This information would assist primary care providers, knowledgeable intermediaries to whom many patients turn for guidance. Primary care physicians currently rely on personal relationships or limited experiences, rather than population-based quality, outcomes, or satisfaction data, when recommending a surgeon. Though many studies have examined factors influencing consumer choice of health plans and primary care doctors, there are limited data on how patients select specialists, particularly surgeons. Consumers with primary care doctors tend to rely on their physician in making specialist selection. In the absence of data, consumers are inconsistent evaluators of provider quality. One study, conducted before hospital report cards were published, found that patients included hospital quality and performance and patient outcomes and experience. It will also impact how health plans, hospitals, and surgeons communicate with patients in an increasingly consumer-driven healthcare market.

REFERENCES: