



State reviews hospital death rates

Solano County facilities compile mixed results

By RICHARD BAMMER/The Reporter, Vacaville

Posted: 01/23/2009 08:38:36 AM PST

Two of four Solano County hospitals—VacaValley Hospital of Vacaville and Sutter Solano Medical Center of Vallejo—had significantly higher death rates in 2007 after certain select procedures or treatments, according to a state database made public Thursday.

The two other hospitals, NorthBay Medical Center in Fairfield and Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Vallejo, had lower-than-average rates in the studied categories, the statistics indicate.

Some of the more negative numbers, compiled by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, stemmed from two conditions that hospitalize thousands of Californians each year: strokes and hip fractures.

In preparing the database, however, Joseph Parker, director of health care outcomes for the OSHPD, stressed that the eight surgeries and treatments it tracks cannot be generalized into broad indicators about whether a hospital is good or bad.

Further, the eight things being tracked are not necessarily the most common or most important actions a hospital takes, he noted, adding that they are being tracked because they may be signs of readily fixable problems.

VacaValley exceeded the state averages in death rates for acute strokes (14.9 percent compared to 10.4) and gastro-intestinal hemorrhage (3.3 compared to 2.1). Sutter Solano exceeded the state averages in gastro-intestinal hemorrhage (2.7 compared to 2.1) and hip fracture (4.1 compared to 2.4).

Sutter Solano spokesman Sy Neilson said that while "the data published by OSHPD on mortality rates is a useful starting point," even that organization acknowledges the report shouldn't be viewed as definitive measures of quality.

"To get a much broader, more comprehensive assessment of a hospital's overall quality of care, consumers should visit CalHospitalCompare.org," he said. "In fact, if you look (there,) Sutter Solano Medical Center rates equal to or better than hospitals in our region. Of the 16 services rated, 13 were rated in the highest categories of 'above average' or 'superior'."

Steve Huddleston, vice president of public affairs for NorthBay Healthcare, which operates both NorthBay Medical Center and VacaValley Hospital, said the numbers do not indicate improvements made at the two facilities.

"Though we're dealing with old information, it's still relevant in that it gives us a point from which we need to improve," Huddleston said, adding, "You never do as well as you wish."

Noting the survey spanned hospitals statewide, Huddleston said, "We weren't the worst or the best - we were in the middle of the pack. In some regards, we were among the best." He referred to the fact that no deaths due to hip fractures occurred at the two NorthBay hospitals.

But he said tracking surveys such as OSHPD's can be misleading, especially for small hospitals, where a population sample of "seven or eight cases with one or two freak death throws off the numbers."

Huddleston cited comments by the spokeswoman for the California Hospital Association, Jan Emerson.

She said the report included statistics of clinically dead patients transferred from other facilities and did not exclude data of patients who had "do not resuscitate" directives in their medical records and were later taken to hospitals, where they were pronounced dead on arrival.

Additionally, Emerson said the report did not consider the results of the care that patients received for some conditions before they were hospitalized. Additionally, she noted the OSHPD did not audit the statistics the report was based on for accuracy.

Though Kaiser Vallejo's numbers were good, a corporate spokeswoman questioned the agency's data-gathering methods.

"Mortality measures are obviously very important, but are also susceptible to data collection, coding and risk-adjustment method issues," said Barbara Crawford, vice president for quality with Oakland-based Kaiser Permanente. "We are examining the OSHPD data to better understand why some of the OSHPD stroke data does not reflect the outcomes of a few of our high-performing stroke prevention and treatment programs."

The federal government tracks 15 mortality indicators, but the state report focuses on only eight because some are covered in different reports or are tracked slightly different, according to OSHPD officials.

The state made the data available to hospitals before it was released to the public and invited hospital officials to submit comment letters.