

# Consumer-Purchaser DISCLOSURE PROJECT

Better information. Better decisions. Better health.

IMPLEMENTING HEALTH CARE REFORM

September 2012

## How Physician Compare Could Help Consumers

The new Physician Compare website (<http://medicare.gov/find-a-doctor/provider-search.aspx>) launched by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is coming of age at a time when consumers are demanding comparative information about almost everything they buy, including health care services. Furthermore, large employers, health insurers, and government programs that pay for health care on consumers' behalf are determined to hold doctors accountable as costs continue to soar. As a result, Physician Compare could become a game changer for consumers, but only if the government is bold and decisive. Of course, the site must be fair to doctors. But consumers and purchasers have a right to know how their doctors measure up when putting their lives and well-being in physicians' hands.

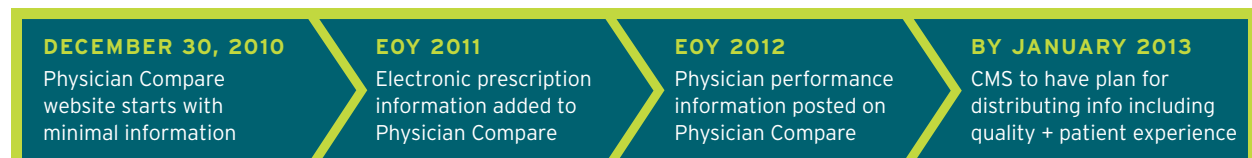
Mandated by the Affordable Care Act, the Physician Compare website was created to allow consumers to compare physicians based on quality of care. In addition to information such as specialty, location, and gender, patients will be able to see and compare how patients rate their experience with doctors as well as how the doctors perform on a dashboard of clinical and outcomes measures.

Physician Compare holds great promise for advancing health care quality and more informed consumer choices, but delivering on the promise will require dramatic improvements in providing information that is meaningful to consumers and presented in a format that is easy to use.

### WHAT'S AVAILABLE NOW

Physician Compare now offers a directory of the roughly 932,000 doctors and other health care providers who accept Medicare patients. It's searchable by zip code, city, state, and medical specialty. It tells users which doctors participate in Medicare's Physician Quality Reporting System (PQRS) where they report information to CMS about the quality of care they provide to Medicare patients with certain medical conditions, such as the number of patients with diabetes who had high blood sugar levels.

### ROLLOUT OF PHYSICIAN COMPARE



## WHAT'S COMING

Over the next several years, the Physician Compare website could become much more valuable and enable doctor-to-doctor comparisons. The Affordable Care Act states that beginning no later than January 2013, CMS is to “implement a plan for making publicly available, through Physician Compare ... information on physician performance that provides comparable information for the public on quality and patient experience measures.” The law includes “to the extent practicable” the following:

- Measures collected under PQRS;
- Patient health outcome and functional status measures;
- Coordination of care and care transitions measures;
- Efficiency measures, episodes of care, and resource use;
- Assessment of patient experience and engagement;
- Measures of safety, effectiveness, and timeliness; and
- Any other measures determined appropriate.

Measures that might be reported on Physician Compare are also being considered for other Medicare programs in the Affordable Care Act, such as the physician value-based payment modifier<sup>1</sup> and Accountable Care Organization (ACO) programs. Additionally, quality measures collected under the Meaningful Use Incentive Program for electronic health records could be publicly reported on this site.

## WHAT MUST BE IMPROVED

Consumers and purchasers alike would like to see a consumer-friendly, easy-to-navigate site containing a strong set of meaningful clinical and patient assessment measures that fairly and meaningfully distinguishes physician quality of care, encourages quality improvement, and enables patients to make educated choices based on individual needs. The following consumer and purchaser recommendations will help Physician Compare reach that goal.

### Measures that matter to patients

To help consumers make meaningful comparisons, the website should feature a core set of measures that apply to most health care professionals and reflect what makes the biggest difference in quality. High on the list should be patient-reported experiences as well as measures of care coordination, appropriateness, and results of care (i.e., health outcomes). Composite measures that summarize a series of proven courses of care will also be more useful than a litany of measures that focus on routine steps in the care process. The website should also contain specialty-specific measures that apply to particular types of providers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Physician Value-Based Payment Modifier will provide differential payment to physicians or physician groups based on the quality of care provided compared to the cost of care.

### Provider-level data

The website should present information about individual clinicians, not just their medical group. Consumers need and want information on how well individual physicians care for their patients. Practice group level data is not always representative of an individual physician's performance because the way physicians within the same group practice care for their patients can vary significantly. Furthermore, individual physicians greatly impact the care that a patient receives. This level of detail will help consumers make better choices and spur quality improvement. Purchasers and consumers know quality improvement accelerates when performance reporting occurs at the individual physician level. Concerns about the impact of small sample size on the statistical robustness of some clinical measures are valid, but there are proven ways to address the issue. While it may not be possible for all physicians, this should not limit it occurring at all.

### Volume and price data

The volume of tests and procedures a doctor performs and how much they are paid for each procedure is important information for consumers. Having this information will help identify trends in the troublesome practice of unnecessary and costly treatments and tests. Purchasers and consumers—including those using state health insurance exchanges—will be able to make more informed choices.

### Consumer awareness and user friendliness

A study of CMS' other Compare sites, such as Hospital Compare and Nursing Home Compare, showed that only 12 percent of patients and their families used these resources to make decisions. Physician Compare needs to be marketed, so that more Americans are aware of its existence. Including decision-support tools that help consumers sort data and ask questions based on their conditions will greatly improve usability and increase traffic on the site. Additionally, CMS should make Physician Compare data available to the private sector, which has demonstrated innovation in putting performance information into the hands of consumers.

### Accuracy

The error rate of the current Physician Compare provider database is believed to exceed 10 percent (previously mentioned CMS reported participating doctors believe this). A high error rate will undermine public and provider trust in the site, which will continue to keep usage rates low. CMS should launch a comprehensive review of the site's accuracy and make it easier for providers to correct information about their practice.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Physician Compare is an important and evolving resource for consumers and purchasers. Currently, the site offers an updated nationwide list of health care providers who accept Medicare patients, but it promises to be much more. The question is: Will the promise be fulfilled?

The Consumer-Purchaser Disclosure Project is a coalition dedicated to improving the quality and affordability of health care in America for consumers and health care purchasers. The project's mission is to put the patient in the driver's seat – to share useful information about provider performance so that patients can make informed choices and the health care system can better reward the best performing providers. The coalition is comprised of leading national and local consumer organizations, employers, and labor organizations. The Consumer-Purchaser Disclosure Project is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation along with support from participating organizations.

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