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Medicare adds patient feedback, surgery costs to hospital site

It'll cost \$1.9 million, reach more than 13 million people and rate more than 2,500 hospitals. The intended result, officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services say, is more hits on their Hospital Compare Web site, a compilation of quality measurements and patient feedback intended as a resource for those seeking hospital care.

Two months after announcing several changes to the information on the site, CMS launched a nationwide advertising campaign today, placing ads in newspapers in every state. The ads offer a taste of the site's content, providing the numbers for use of antibiotics before surgery and hospital responsiveness to patients' needs, CMS Acting Administrator Kerry Weems said Tuesday.

"(The site is) an easy and reliable way for Americans to make informed health care decisions for themselves and their families," Weems said during a teleconference. The site, started in 2005, has always offered quality indicators such as the antibiotics use or treatment for blood clots after certain surgeries. But this spring, the federal agency posted feedback from patient satisfaction surveys and payment ranges from Medicare for a variety of surgeries and services.

Therefore, viewers can see that Medicare paid an average \$11,198 for implanting a pacemaker at St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center in Twin Falls, while the same surgery cost \$14,083 at Pocatello's Portneuf Medical Center. They can also see that 50 percent of patients at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise said the area around their room was always quiet at night, as opposed to 44 percent back at St. Luke's Magic Valley. The goal is to give prospective patients as much information as possible about their health care, said Gene Frogge, deputy regional administrator for CMS Region 10, which includes Idaho. "I think it's really a first step, if you've read what (Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt) is trying to do," Frogge said. "He's trying to make pricing more transparent."

Providing the data is voluntary for smaller critical access hospitals, which make up five of south-central Idaho's six hospitals. Only three of the six submit data to the site: St. Luke's Magic Valley, Cassia Regional Medical Center in Burley and St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center in Ketchum. Hospital officials seem to have embraced the changes. Cassia Regional Administrator Ken Harman said he thinks the site as a whole is a good way to improve patient care. "Any time patients can get information, it's helpful," he said. Officials did have some suggestions for future changes, however, criticizing the time it takes to post the data online and the site's layout. "It's not necessarily easy to navigate," St. Luke's Magic Valley CEO Mark Schwartz said. CMS plans to do some consumer testing on the site later this summer, regional spokeswoman Terry Cumpton said, applying the results in December. And the current data covers reports from October 2006 to June 2007, Weems said, a period he considered recent enough to be accurate. The site, all interviewed said, should only be one tool of many used to help someone select their health care. "Health care really boils down to a personal choice," Schwartz said.