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Prescription for recovery

KMC recognized for low return rates on heart, pneumonia patients

Bill Pearson wasn't sure how much time he had left last December when nurses wheeled him into intensive care at Kootenai Medical Center for congestive heart failure. "I was thinking, 'Gee something's wrong,'" the Coeur d'Alene man remembered last week. "... I hope we're at the right place."



Bill Pearson has his pulse taken while he watches the television and exercises Wednesday morning during a cardiac rehab class at Kootenai Medical's Heart Clinic.

Apparently, he was. Because he hasn't had to go back. After a week in the hospital, the medical staff gave him the skinny on how to avoid a repeat of his episode: Less salt on his meals, prescriptions for cholesterol and blood pressure, measuring his blood pressure at home.

They also set him up with cardiac rehab classes at KMC three times a week, where he sweats on the bike and treadmill. It's working, he admits. "I'm more active, for one thing," announced the elderly man, who preferred not to give his age. "My wife doesn't holler at me forever to do things, like cutting grass on a hot day. It's great."

It's a common tale at KMC. The Coeur d'Alene hospital scored among the best 100 hospitals in the nation for low re-admission rates for heart failure and pneumonia, according to a recent update of treatment statistics by the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS).

"My first reaction was 'Yea, finally, (KMC) is being recognized,'" said Dawn Johnson, KMC nurse and case manager. "These are number levels that we've been working toward for five years."

KMC tied with two other hospitals for the fourth lowest re-admission rate for pneumonia patients, according to statistics collected from more than 4,500 hospitals nationwide.

Only 13.5 percent of pneumonia patients discharged from KMC are re-admitted within 30 days, compared to the national average of 18.2 percent.

On top of that, only 19.2 percent of heart failure patients at the hospital are readmitted within a month, the 17th lowest rate in the country. The national average for heart failure re-admissions is 24.5 percent. Johnson attributed the numbers to the case management program KMC started in 2004. "Myself and the hospital staff have been working hard toward improving our patient outcomes so that the necessity for them to come back in 30 days is reduced," she said.

Under the program, the hospital follows a checklist of best-practice guidelines supplied by CMS, designed to ensure patients continue to recover after leaving the hospital, she said.

In the case of heart failure, for instance, the staff assigns a new diet, talks with families about lifestyle changes, and ensures the patient is equipped with ways to self monitor, like a scale and machine to measure blood pressure.

The patients are also signed up for cardiac rehab classes at the hospital.

In the case of pneumonia, Johnson said, it's a simple case of educating patients on quitting smoking, and ensuring patients are given an antibiotic immediately.

"We know if you follow these best practice guidelines, these patients will do better," Johnson said.

The biggest challenge has been ensuring patient compliance, said Marcy O'Connell, performance improvement analyst at KMC.

"Just the general culture and lifestyle practices of people in America aren't real conducive to preventative care," she said. "Especially when you are dealing with an elderly population already very much established in their lifestyle. They're very dependent on quick meals and high-sodium foods they grew up on."

The hospital keeps a lid on reckless behavior by ensuring patients are equipped with everything they need to follow doctors' orders, Johnson said.

"We have multi-disciplinary team members go over everything," she said of measures like setting up special care services at home. "We're very goal oriented to make this as positive an outcome as we possibly can."

KMC's statistics hovered around the national average for other treatment rates.

The hospital reported that 12.8 percent of heart failure patients die, just above the national trend of 11.1 percent.

Pneumonia death at KMC is also 12.5 percent, compared to the national average of 11.5 percent.

The hospital was just over 19 percent for heart attack re-admissions, and just under 17 percent of heart attack deaths, the same as the national average.

The findings are based on more than 1 million deaths and re-admissions among Medicare patients from 2005 to 2008. Statistics from hospitals across the country are accessible at www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov.

USA Today compiled an analysis of re-admission and mortality rates, which can be viewed at: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/hospitals-graphic.htm>.

Johnson predicted KMC will only see more success.

"Seeing these numbers increase using best-practice guidelines, that means you've got patients who are discharging with better outcomes, and are getting the best quality care available," she said. "Using this same model for other diseases, we can work toward improving in those areas, as well."