

Physician Performance Outcomes

Many visitors to the ABMS Website request information regarding how well “Dr. X” performs a surgical procedure or how many people “Dr. Y” has cured using a certain treatment. Virtually all specialist physicians certified by the ABMS Member Boards also want to know these things. Physicians would like to know that the specialist to whom they refer patients is capable of providing quality medical care. Equally important to physicians, is their own desire to improve patient care. To do so, it is necessary for physicians to determine whether or not the care they provide is the best that can be achieved within the limits of current medical knowledge and technical capability.

With all the progress in medicine, why don’t we have such information? The reason, in a nutshell, is that with few exceptions, the science to develop standards to measure medical performance has been largely unavailable. To develop standards to judge performance, one must have good data. For example, baseball fans know that, assuming the same number of at bats, a .350 hitter has gotten more hits than has a .250 hitter. To determine these common averages requires accurate, comparable numbers such as number of times at bat and number of hits. It is easy to accumulate the data needed to rate hitters in baseball, but the data required to develop standards for and measures of medical practice are difficult and costly to obtain. A potential answer to the problem of data collection is the conversion of patient records from a paper to an electronic format. This would allow more thorough and timely information exchange among health care providers and provide more reliable data collection. One factor, which may prevent the rapid development of such a system, is concern for patient confidentiality. The problems are not insurmountable and we believe that such a system will become commonplace in the future.

The American Board of Medical Specialties and its Member Boards are committed to and working on developing standards and measures of quality medical care and to do so in partnership with a wide variety of other organizations in the health care community. It is intended that these standards and measures be based on sound scientific principles that are accepted by the entire health care community as well as patients. As is true for many of the advances in medical science, these standards and measures will take time to develop to ensure that they are the best available and address the concerns of patients and the profession.