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BUSINESS

How to Find the Cost of Hospital Medical Procedures

Institutions must give consumers a way to examine the prices of 300 ‘shoppable’ services, as well as offer a larger data file including all of their offerings



By *Tom McGinty* and *Anna Wilde Mathews*

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On Jan. 1, nearly all U.S. hospitals were required to start posting the prices they negotiate with insurers for services ranging from a simple imaging exam to a complex heart surgery and everything in-between.

New federal regulations require hospitals to give consumers a way to examine the prices of 300 “shoppable” services, as well as offer a larger data file that includes all of the hospitals’ offerings.

Some hospitals have yet to unveil the data, despite the deadline and a potential fine of \$300 a day for noncompliance.

But many have begun offering at least a peek, while not always making the data easy to find, even though the rule says it is supposed to be displayed publicly and prominently. Hospitals that have posted the data often put it on a page labeled with the term “price

transparency.”

“Hospitals have a fair amount of discretion” on the format of the data they offer, said Nisha Kurani, a senior policy analyst at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Some hospitals are focusing on tools that consumers can use to look up particular services, but those interfaces typically don’t let consumers see all of the negotiated rates for all insurers for a given procedure, and instead ask users to fill in which insurer they subscribe to.

Mayo Clinic offers a search interface at <https://costestimator.mayoclinic.org/>. The nonprofit hasn’t posted a file covering all of its negotiated rates and says it is working to have one online by this spring.

The hospital chain Sutter Health, on the other hand, is offering downloadable data for all of its hospitals on a single webpage labeled “Healthcare Cost Transparency,” here: <https://www.sutterhealth.org/for-patients/healthcare-cost-transparency>

Efforts to pull together and standardize data from many hospitals are emerging. Turquoise Health Co. has scoured the websites of every known hospital in the country—more than 6,000 providers—and found disclosures that at least partially meet the requirements for 1,700 hospitals, according to Chris Severn, a co-founder of the company. Consumers can search the data on Turquoise’s website at <https://turquoise.health/>

“This data was hard to find but it’s incredibly useful and, overall, a large amount of the industry has complied,” Mr. Severn said. “This is a huge step towards cost-informed decision making in health care.”

The hospital rule that took effect on Jan. 1 is only the first part of a broader federal pricing-transparency initiative. A similar rule that applies to insurers begins to take effect later. By Jan. 1, 2023, insurers must begin offering consumer-focused digital tools that allow their enrollees to look up prices and out-of-pocket costs for 500 medical services, Ms. Kurani said. By the start of 2024, that list is supposed to include all covered medical services and items, she said.

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