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Health care report shows NMC leads rest in quality care

It's a given that the health care profession will continue to be examined with the same sort of rigor that a physician would apply to a patient showing the symptoms of heart disease. Health care reform is the Obama administration's top domestic priority and the president's resolve appears undiminished.

The president has also made it clear that he wants to find out what works, and what doesn't and deal with it accordingly. As with any top-to-bottom assessment, those at the top are the ones to emulate, to hold up as an example to others, and, for lack of a better word, to protect.

If the president were to come to Vermont in search of what works, and an example of what to protect, he'd come to Northwestern Medical Center. In last Friday's Messenger, it was announced that NMC scored well above the state and national average when considering quality of care, pricing and financial data. We have a health care facility whose example should be embraced.

That's critically important for two reasons: First, and most obvious, it's important to be recognized as providing superior care. That recognition is what gives the public the confidence necessary to patronize the facility. It's a competitive profession and one in which quality of care is the only long-term predictor of success. Second, it's reassuring to be told that not only does NMC provide the superior care, but that it does so embracing the need to be fiscally prudent. Over the past two decades NMC routinely requested rate increases that were far below those of other hospitals. Knowing the hospital is able to offer top quality care and remain on solid fiscal footing is beginning to be the Holy Grail of the health care profession. Again, this is the sort of operation that should be used as a pattern for others.

It's also hard work. As Jane Catton, NMC's chief quality officer was quoted as saying: "We have really made this a strategic focus. Everyone is talking about this and involved in it: the staff, managers, physicians, the Board of Directors. Having the data always at the forefront keeps it in focus."

She's correct. The transparency involved in calculating a hospital's performance is both liberating, and daunting. It's liberating for the consumer, who can access the information and thus make individual choices based on the information gathered. It's daunting for the profession which, historically, is not used to being judged in any systemic and very public way.

For NMC, it's the best of both worlds. It's great to have a headline that confirms the success of their hard work, and it gives the medical staff the sort of boost that encourages even better performance and more transparency. It's nice for the hospital to be told its performance in all but one category exceeded that of the region's other three hospitals.

Just for a second, let's bask in a little of the David and Goliath sunshine.

As is well understood, high performance is not achieved through middling efforts. What was achieved yesterday is no guarantee of what happens tomorrow. As good as this report shows NMC to be, staying on top demands a continued dedication to exceeding what is required. That requires a team of good leaders - which NMC has been fortunate to have in abundance - a Board of Directors committed to the hospital's success, and a philosophy that embraces the need for the public to be informed as to its strengths, its weaknesses and its future.

As the debate on health care reform begins to take shape, it's nice to know that we will be battling from a position of strength, not weakness. We should be appreciative of the hospital's efforts and proud of its accomplishments.

by Emerson Lynn