Public Reporting of Cardiac Surgery Performance: Introduction

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Cardiac surgery has been at the forefront of health-care quality measurement and improvement for more than 2 decades. The Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) Adult Cardiac Surgery Database was introduced in 1989 and now enrolls patients from approximately 95% of cardiac surgery programs in the United States. Robust general thoracic and congenital cardiac surgery databases have also been developed and implemented.

The audited clinical data from the STS Adult Cardiac Surgery Database have been used to develop statistical models that account for patient severity and complexity by estimating the risks of nine different outcomes for isolated coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), isolated valve procedures, and valve procedures combined with CABG operations. STS Database participants receive comprehensive feedback reports every quarter of these risk-adjusted results compared with STS national benchmarks and with the results for hospitals of similar size and teaching intensity. Some regions have also requested custom reports to guide their quality improvement efforts.

In 2007 the STS Quality Measurement Task Force developed a multidimensional composite quality measure for isolated CABG that includes 11 National Quality Forum-endorsed process and outcomes measures, grouped within four quality domains. STS Database participants are provided with their numerical scores for each of these domains and for the overall composite. They also receive a “star rating” that classifies their performance as below average, average, or above average compared with STS national benchmarks. The STS composite score methodology has recently been endorsed by the National Quality Forum and is widely recognized as a comprehensive, scientifically valid metric to assess CABG quality.

STS launched its newest quality initiative in September 2010. In collaboration with Consumers Union, STS began publishing the isolated CABG composite scores of consenting STS Database participants. A similar public reporting initiative was implemented on the STS Website in early 2011. The percentage of STS Database participants who have consented to public reporting is growing rapidly, which is a tribute to the professionalism of our specialty.

This two-part series provides a comprehensive, state-of-the-art review of public reporting, an approach to quality assessment and improvement that will be an important component of healthcare reform. Part 1 discusses the ethical foundation for public reporting, the historical evolution of this practice in the United States, its impact on quality improvement and consumer choice, and its potential unintended negative consequences. In Part 2 we discuss issues related to the implementation of public reporting, including types of measures, data source and analytic methodology, classification of providers into performance categories, methods to enhance consumer interpretability of report cards, and other practical considerations.

We hope this review will serve as a valuable resource for those who wish to better understand the many issues surrounding public reporting. Although cardiac surgery has been a leader in these efforts, performance measurement and transparency will play an increasingly important role across all of healthcare.

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