

Hospital Care for Elderly with Chronic Conditions Varies in U.S.

October 7, 2004—Levels of medical care for Medicare patients with similar chronic conditions vary widely, even among hospitals identified as among the nation's best for geriatric care, according to studies conducted by Dartmouth Medical School.

The report, published Thursday by the journal *Health Affairs*, found that the frequency of physician visits, the number of diagnostic tests and the rate of hospital and intensive care unit stays vary markedly among hospitals identified as "best" for geriatric care by the magazine *U.S. News & World Report*.

The Dartmouth studies also show that a higher intensity of care and higher level of spending are not associated with better quality or longer survival times, even in the most renowned teaching hospitals. The evidence researchers gathered show that a very high intensity of care for people with certain terminal medical conditions might hasten death.

Dr. John E. Wennberg, who directs the Center for the Evaluative Clinical Sciences at Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, N.H., said the studies prove that "no matter how preeminent the institution, the care varies all over the ballpark." Wennberg has documented significant geographic variations in medical practice since the early 1970s.

The findings identify, by hospital, where Medicare enrollees are receiving much more intensive care for common medical conditions, which may raise questions about the usual methods of identifying the best hospitals for care.

Other findings in the report include:

*Patients receiving care from New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center spent almost twice as many days in the hospital as patients treated at the Mayo Clinic's St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minn.

*Intensive care unit days for patients at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Medical Center were three times greater than for ICU patients treated at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

*Mount Sinai Medical Center and UCLA patients had twice as many visits from physicians as patients treated at Duke University Hospital in North Carolina.

*Patients at UCLA and Duke were less likely to see a primary care physician than patients at St. Louis University or Mount Sinai Medical Center. Patients at UCLA had 2.8 times more visits with specialist physicians than with primary care physicians.