

# Quality of U.S. Hospices varies, patients left in dark

By Peter Whoriskey and Dan Keating, Washington Post

More than a million times a year, a terminally ill patient in the United States is enrolled in hospice care. Each time, the family confronts a decision that, while critical, often must be made almost blindly: Which hospice to hire?

A boom in the industry allows patients to choose from an array of hospice outfits, some of them excellent. More than a thousand new hospices have opened in the United States in the past decade. But the absence of public information about their quality, a void that is unusual even within the health-care industry, leaves consumers at a loss to distinguish the good from the bad.

Though the federal government publishes consumer data about the quality of other health-care companies, including hospitals, nursing homes and home health agencies, it provides no such information about hospices.

After years of public pressure, Congress in 2010 required that the government publish information about hospice quality, but the Medicare agency said in May that such consumer information would not be forthcoming until 2017 – at the earliest.

Similarly, state records of hospice inspections are often unpublished, sparse, and, when they are available, difficult to find and understand. Government inspections of hospices have typically been scheduled about every six years, though Congress in September called for more frequent checks.

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