

## **Rating Coachella Valley Hospitals: What Consumers Should Know**

### **The Big Picture — Our Nation's Health Care System is Broken**

Before attempting to assess the quality of hospital care in the Coachella Valley, consumers need to first acknowledge that our nation's health care system is broken and the current economic downturn is having a dramatic impact on hospitals across the country as well as throughout California.

Hospitals represent a large sector of our national economy. In [California](#) alone, they employ more than 400,000 workers and spend more than \$57 billion annually on goods and services — including \$30 billion on employee compensation.

Although it is reported that the United States spends more on health care ([16% of the Gross Domestic Product](#)) than any other nation, results of a recent survey by the [National Health Interview Survey](#) disclose that from January through June 2008, 42.8 million persons in the United States were uninsured.

It is the heavy burden of providing health care for the uninsured and underinsured that is being blamed for much of the crisis in today's health care industry. When the uninsured become ill, a 1986 federal law, entitled the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act ([EMTALA](#)), entitles them to emergency services regardless of their ability to pay.

According to the [American College of Emergency Physicians](#), it is EMTALA that is costing hospitals and physicians billions of dollars in bad debt or "uncompensated care" each year — adding to the already overburdened, overwhelmed, and under-funded medical emergency systems nationwide.

### **Emergency Rooms In Need of Urgent Care**

This severe loss of revenue is quickly causing emergency room providers across the country to seek urgent care for their own institutions. In a June 14, 2006 report entitled, [The Future of Emergency Care](#), the Institute of Medicine reported that visits to emergency rooms between 1993 and 2003 increased from 90.3 million to 113.9 million, yet during this same period 425 emergency rooms in hospitals across the country were shut down, causing severe overcrowding, dangerously long waits, and patients being parked on gurneys in hallways awaiting beds.

The situation in California is no less critical. In a March 2, 2007 article appearing in the online version of [The San Diego Union-Tribune](#), Chris Van Gorder reports that in the decade between March of 1997 and March 2007, more than 65 emergency rooms and 70 acute-care hospitals closed their doors in the state of California, leaving remaining hospitals, medical personnel, and resources stretched beyond capacity.

### **California Cannot Risk More Hospital Closures**

California cannot risk even one more hospital closure or reduction of services. That's the warning in a new California Hospital Association [Report on California Hospitals and the Economy](#), which ranks California 49<sup>th</sup> nationally in hospital bed availability with only 1.9 hospital beds per 1,000 population. The report also reveals that there is a 73 percent increase in consumers having difficulty paying out-of-pocket health care costs, and a 33 percent increase in emergency room (ER) visits for uninsured patients.

Hospitals have always depended on revenues from elective procedures to help them improve their bottom line, however, with the rapid growth in unemployment, more Californians are finding themselves without job-based insurance -- creating a 30 percent decline in the number of elective procedures and hospital profits.

As if the state of the faltering national economy is not bad enough, California hospitals and residents continue to be placed at risk of hospital and department closures because of inadequate [Medicare and Medi-Cal reimbursements](#) to providers. Medicare reportedly reimburses California hospitals at \$3.5 billion below the cost of providing care, and recent Medi-Cal funding has fallen short of covering costs for California hospitals by more than \$3.7 billion.

## **Eisenhower Medical Center Terminates Medi-Cal Contract**

The Coachella Valley is not exempt from the current crisis in our medical system. In September of 2008, Lora Hines reported in [The Press-Enterprise](#) that Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage had become the first Inland hospital to terminate its contract to care for some Medi-Cal patients. Michael Landes, president of Eisenhower's foundation, stated in the article that the decision was based on the fact that Eisenhower was losing about \$3.5 million a year. Although some services will still be available, the decision will reportedly apply to Medi-Cal patients who do not need emergency room care and are not in health maintenance organizations (HMOs).

For those who may not be aware, [Eisenhower Medical Center](#) is classified as a "not-for-profit" hospital, because it depends on patient revenues and private charitable donations for its operations. Eisenhower has gained an institutional-type celebrity status since its opening in 1971, because of its long history and involvement with celebrity contributors such as Bob and Dolores Hope, Frank Sinatra, Gene Autry, and Lucille Ball – just to name a few. Later, with the development of the Betty Ford Center for alcohol and drug rehabilitation and the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, Eisenhower Medical Center went on to gain international recognition.

Although Eisenhower's motto for years has been, "Five-Star Treatment for Everyone," the recent termination of its Medi-Cal contract, in combination with the addition of the new Greg and Stacy Renker Pavilion, leads this author to believe that Eisenhower has shifted its mission and focus to providing five-star medical services primarily for the valley's economically affluent.

The new Greg and Stacy Renker Pavilion, currently completed but awaiting licensing early this year, features 24-all private suites with five-star amenities for reportedly Eisenhower's "most discerning patients requiring the finest in patient care." Although it has not been officially announced to the public, some employees at the hospital have privately disclosed that the new pavilion has been planned and designed for use by Eisenhower's top donors, philanthropists, and guests when they find themselves in need of medical treatment.

Unfortunately, what's best for Eisenhower in these difficult economic times may not be what's best for residents of the Coachella Valley. Those mid-valley Medi-Cal patients, formerly served by Eisenhower, will now be directed to Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs, or JFK Memorial Hospital in Indio — increasing the already heavy burden placed upon these two hospitals by having to care for even more of the valley's uninsured and underinsured.

## **Hospital Quality Ratings — Consumer Caution Advised**

This author began researching hospital quality ratings several years ago after experiencing a number of quality care issues at two local hospitals. Quality ratings are prepared by a growing number of for-profit and non-profit organizations that publish lists of top hospitals and rate/rank them on procedures ranging from heart attack care to total hip replacement.

One of the major challenges for consumers is that in spite of the fact that rating organizations work with essentially the same information, results vary – making it difficult for the average consumer to make adequate comparisons. The reason is that every organization uses different criteria for their ratings and rankings.

Then there is the issue of rating credibility. In a November 2008 article, Christian Livermore of the *Times Herald-Record* reports that some company ratings are labeled “suspect” because they reportedly make money from the ratings. For example, the article reports that HealthGrades, considered in many circles to be one of the leading health care rating companies, rates about 5,000 hospitals nationwide. Although they do not charge to rate the hospitals, HealthGrades reportedly charges up to \$155,000 for the hospitals they rate to use their ratings in advertising and promotions. In fact, according to their user agreement, no publication may reproduce, publish, or even cite any data from the HealthGrades Web site without permission.

Dave Jensen, a columnist and 25-year veteran of the biotech/pharmaceutical industry, posted on a November 2008 blog that he purchased an online report from HealthGrades for \$12.95 – only to find that, in his opinion, it was a waste of money and that HealthGrades had begun billing his credit card every month (without permission) for “watchdog subscriptions” on the doctor(s) he had checked ratings for. As a result, he placed HealthGrades in the “Sham” category in his blogger’s editorial opinion.

So how should consumers use hospital rating information? Here are some recommendations:

1. Always check more than one source of ratings.
2. View ratings organizations as a starting point for finding a hospital, not as the deciding factor.
3. Talk to health care providers and local hospital staff about what this information means and how it can be used to make health care decisions.
4. Refer to the Hospital Checklist on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Web site at <http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov/> for a list of questions and considerations when pre-selecting a hospital.

## Directory of Hospital Rating Organizations

The following list of medical rating organizations/companies has been compiled merely as a convenience for consumers. *The Palm Springs Area Survival Guide* is not a referral service, and makes no claims as to the accuracy of the information or ratings provided. Consumers are cautioned to seek additional information from licensed medical professionals before making any decisions regarding medical care or procedures as a result of information on this site or that of any organization/company listed.

<http://www.calhospitalcompare.org/> This site includes ratings for clinical care, patient safety, and patient experience for the more than 200 hospitals in California. The site is the result of a partnership between three independent organizations: The California HealthCare Foundation, the University of California at San Francisco Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies, and the California Hospitals Assessment and Reporting Taskforce (CHART), a not-for-profit public benefit corporation.

[www.ConsumerHealthRatings.com/](http://www.ConsumerHealthRatings.com/) This site serves as a portal for information on organizations that rate or report performance on specific hospitals, health plans, physicians, nursing homes, home health agencies and other health care providers in the United States.

<http://www.healthgrades.com/> Provides ratings for hospitals, nursing homes, and physicians. The site provides free hospital ratings for all states (5 star, 3 star, and 1 star), but BEWARE — this site may try to sell you information that you can find on other sites for free.

<http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov/> **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Hospital Compare** – A federal government comparison rating tool for heart attack, heart failure, pneumonia, surgical infection prevention. This is an excellent site because the government standardized its ratings for all hospitals, and most ratings are based on more than just Medicare patients. The site also includes patient satisfaction survey ratings and results for hospital inpatients across the U.S.

<http://www.leapfroggroup.org/> **The Leapfrog Group** — Compares themselves with Consumer Reports — reporting overall health care quality and outcomes and the steps hospitals are taking to reduce preventable medical mistakes.

<http://www.qualitycheck.org/consumer/> **The Joint Commission-Quality Check®** - Provides accreditation and comparison information for hospitals, home health/hospice, laboratories, some nursing homes & assisted living centers, and other health care services. Quality Check® lists both Joint Commission-accredited and health care organizations not accredited by the Joint Commission. Consumers can search by city and state, by name or by zip code.

<http://www.100tophospitals.com/> **Thomson Reuters Top 100 Hospitals** — Each year Thomson Reuters names their Top 100 Hospitals evaluated on key measures of clinical, operational and financial performance. The company rates over 3,000 hospitals nationwide from which they select their top 100. Although the site lists the top 100 hospitals and their respective cities/states, **consumers have to pay to see the actual ratings** of the top 100 and all others that participated in the study.

<http://health.usnews.com/sections/health/best-hospitals> **U.S. News and World Report's Annual Hospital Rankings Report 2008** – Rigorously reviewed 5,453 hospitals nationwide — judging them not in routine procedures but in difficult cases across an entire specialty area. Hospitals were ranked in 16 specialties, from cancer and heart disease to respiratory disorders and urology.

## **Three Hospitals Serve the Coachella Valley**

There are three major hospitals in the Coachella Valley that provide medical services for residents and visitors: [Desert Regional Medical Center](#) in Palm Springs, [Eisenhower Medical Center](#) in Rancho Mirage, and [JFK Memorial Hospital](#) in Indio.

Since most ratings companies prohibit the reprinting of specific hospital scores and rankings from their sites, this author can only provide general observations regarding ratings/rankings of hospitals in the Coachella Valley. Consumers are urged, therefore, to spend time searching the various hospital ratings sites to view the specific ratings on each of the three area hospitals, and then as discussed previously, use the findings as discussion points with their physicians and other medical personnel.

## **General Observations:**

1. Although Eisenhower Medical Center reports receiving top awards in 2008 for Joint Replacement and Gastrointestinal Surgery in the state of California from one well recognized national rating company, the hospital didn't rank among the top 50 best hospitals nationally in Orthopedics or Gastrointestinal Disorders in the [U.S. News and World Report Best Hospitals Rankings for 2008](#). This is a good example of how ratings criteria and outcomes vary significantly with different companies.
2. On December 11, 2008, [Leapfrog Group](#) identified Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs as one of 13 hospitals nationally to receive the nation's "Highest Value Hospitals" award based on a review of over 1,220 hospitals participating in the survey. It's interesting to note that Eisenhower Medical Center, with all the awards reported on its Web site, did not receive the same distinction by Leapfrog.

3. Eisenhower Medical Center also reports receiving a top patient safety award from a well recognized national rating company in 2008, however, when reviewing the current Patient Safety Ratings from The Leapfrog Group, Desert Regional Medical Center was actually reported as showing the most progress (among the three Coachella Valley Hospitals) toward meeting standards in overall patient safety. In fact, the site reported that Eisenhower declined to respond in two categories of evaluation. Ratings in patient safety from the [Cal Hospital Compare](#) site rated John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital “superior” or “above-average” in all categories of Patient Safety whereas Eisenhower Medical Center reportedly declined to participate. This is another example of how information, ratings, and outcomes vary with different companies.

4. Using the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Hospital Compare site, JFK Memorial Hospital in Indio received the highest overall ratings among the three Coachella Valley Hospitals for *Hospital Process of Care Measures* defined as measures that show (in percentage or as a rate) how often a health care provider gives recommended care. Actually, this author has discovered that JFK has received excellent ratings in a number of categorical ratings — in some cases and categories exceeding the ratings of both Desert Regional and Eisenhower Medical Centers.

5. Upon visiting the Web sites for Desert Regional Medical Center, Eisenhower Medical Center, and J.F.K. Memorial Hospital, it becomes evident that Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage touts the most awards — most of which have been received from the same well known rating company over the past few years. After an extensive review of the literature and health care rating companies and rankings, this author must emphasize that these tools are merely a starting point for consumers to begin researching health care providers. They are, by no means, a guarantee of quality health care and in some cases significant inconsistencies in ratings raise a red flag that the results may be suspect — especially if providers are required to pay for the use of the ratings in promotions and publications.

***Publisher’s Picks for Web Resources:***

[http://www.time.com/time/2008/health\\_care/](http://www.time.com/time/2008/health_care/)

<http://www.calhospital.org/Download/CHASpecialReport.pdf>

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/insur200812.htm>

<http://health.usnews.com/sections/health/best-hospitals>

<http://www.calhospitalcompare.org/>

<http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov/>

[www.ConsumerHealthRatings.com/](http://www.ConsumerHealthRatings.com/)

<http://www.leapfroggroup.org/>

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