

Lessons for federal health policy

The study was meant to offer a bird's eye view of multiple factors around hospitalization and how the federal government assesses quality of care. Previous analysis of federal hospital quality programs has been more limited in scope, said coauthor [Vincent Liu, MD, MS](#), a research scientist with the [Division of Research](#). "Only looking at one slice at a time offers incomplete understanding of how these decisions affect global patient health," said Dr. Liu, a practicing intensivist with The Permanente Medical Group.

The authors highlight problems with health policy approaches that are meant to incentivize quality care but that could be misleading without more detail and context, said lead author [Gabriel Escobar, MD](#), who directs the Division of Research Systems Research Initiative and serves as regional director for hospital operations research for Kaiser Permanente Northern California (KPNC).

They emphasized a need to improve risk adjustment in quality measures. Kaiser Permanente's internal benchmarking takes advantage of clinical data available in modern comprehensive electronic medical records. "Risk adjustment based only on age, sex, and coded comorbidities is inadequate," Dr. Escobar said. KPNC assigns hourly automated severity of illness, hourly inpatient deterioration risk, and daily rehospitalization risk scores to all adult inpatients.

Escobar said it is also important for hospital quality programs to add nuance when comparing hospitals to one another. For example, data could be plotted two dimensions, with post-discharge mortality on one axis and non-elective rehospitalization on another, he suggested.

Observation status also needs more exploration, he said; this analysis found KPNC's physicians, who are adhering to current regulations, admitted 16.5% of patients on observation status rather than as regular inpatients. But outside KPNC, detailed metrics such as mortality rates among observation patients are not known, making it difficult to establish sound policy, Dr. Escobar said.