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Looking for Answers When Choosing Care

By GINA KOLATA

IT is a question that occurs to almost everyone who becomes seriously ill: Should you go to your local hospital or would you do better if you went to a major medical center? It may mean a long trip when you are ill and it will almost certainly mean seeing doctors who are strangers to you. But what if going to a major medical center makes the difference between life and death? Patients reach different conclusions, based often on gut feelings about a doctor or a hospital. And medical researchers, looking for data, say they are not always certain themselves about how to decide.

"There really is very, very little information," says Dr. Elliott S. Fisher, a professor at Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, N.H., who studies medical outcomes. "It's the great weakness of all the efforts to foster consumer engagement in health care decision making."

But there are a few hints, he and others say, and the answers from the studies so far have sometimes been a surprise.

For some common illnesses, there may be no difference in outcomes between community hospitals and academic medical centers, ones that are connected to medical schools and that serve as referral centers for patients with the most complicated, difficult cases. For heart surgery, what matters appears to be the surgeon's experience, not the number of such patients at the hospital. But for some cancers, the important factor seems to be the total number of patients with that cancer at a hospital, not the number any particular surgeon sees.

Everyone agrees that medical statistics are not the only issue. People want to like and trust their doctors. And with a community hospital, patients have the convenience of staying close to home and may be more likely to receive warm, personal care. That was an important consideration for Mary Bruce Buchanan, a 60-year-old retired real estate broker from Flemington, N.J., whose decision about where to go for cancer care went against her own upbringing. Her father, a surgeon, had trained at the University of Pennsylvania and, she said, "when anything was really wrong, that was where you went."

But when Ms. Buchanan received a diagnosis of breast cancer a few years ago, she stayed with the local doctor who found her tumor, Dr. Rachel P. Dultz, at University Medical Center, a community hospital in Princeton, N.J. She just had a good, warm feeling about Dr. Dultz, she said, and could not imagine that she would receive better care from anyone else.

"If I went to a Sloan-Kettering, I'm sure there are fabulous people there, but you've got to have total confidence in the person who's going to be taking care of you," Ms. Buchanan said.

Patsy Brandt of Cherry Hill, N.J., came to the opposite conclusion. She went to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and never investigated any other options for her breast cancer treatment.

"It's sort of a no-brainer when one lives in a doable radius of a major teaching and research hospital," Mrs. Brandt said.

Mrs. Brandt, who is 63, says that after her initial diagnosis and a lumpectomy, she went to the University of Pennsylvania's hospital and she became a patient of Dr. John Glick. She had radiation treatments and chemotherapy at Penn and is now going through more chemotherapy there because her cancer has spread.

"I never considered going anywhere else," Mrs. Brandt said. "Dr. Glick is at the top of his research game,

and from the beginning he instilled great confidence in me and my family."

Other patients, Dr. Glick said, are eager to return to their local doctors for chemotherapy and follow-up care, and he encourages it whenever he thinks it is appropriate. Penn has a network of community physicians, and other academic hospitals, like Memorial Sloan-Kettering, have suburban satellite centers.

"We try to get patients back into our network of community physicians if we think the same care can be given," Dr. Glick said. If there is a specialized surgical technique or treatment that is available only at Penn, though, he encourages patients to stay at Penn for that treatment.

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