Do Rural Patients Bypass Their Local Hospital for Outpatient Procedures?

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“Yes,” say LHC Scholar Nir Menachemi and colleagues. “We found that approximately 53 percent of colonoscopy and 45 percent of upper gastrointestinal endoscopy patients bypassed their local rural hospital for treatment at either a free-standing ambulatory surgery center (ASC) or a nonlocal hospital outpatient department (HOPD). For these procedures, the health of the patient and their type of health insurance play a critical role in where they are treated.”

Compared to urban hospitals, rural hospitals generally operate on a smaller scale and offer fewer services. As inpatient procedures shift to outpatient settings, if enough patients bypass their local hospital it can stop investment in new technology and personnel thereby affecting the institution’s ability to stay in business. While many rural facilities have developed HOPDs, ASCs are a rapidly increasing part of the outpatient market. It has been suggested that ASCs treat the healthiest and most comprehensively insured patients who may also be the most profitable.

The database for this study included all patients in Florida that received either a colonoscopy or upper gastrointestinal endoscopy at an HOPD or ASC between 1997 and 2004. The rural patients were analyzed to see if they chose an HOPD in their zip code, a nonlocal HOPD, or an ASC. For both procedures, patients bypassing for treatment in an ASC were less likely to bypass if they had a more serious medical condition. However, the more medically complex the patient, the more likely they were to leave the area and be treated in a nonlocal HOPD. In addition, ASCs in this study predominantly treated relatively healthy, white, commercially insured patients. Nonlocal HOPDs tended to treat patients who were sicker, minority, and publicly insured or under managed care.

“When rural hospitals are unable to provide outpatient procedures, access to care for the local population is directly affected,” say the researchers. “As the number of procedures being performed in the outpatient setting continues to grow, more research will be needed to increase the understanding of this local hospital bypass phenomenon.”