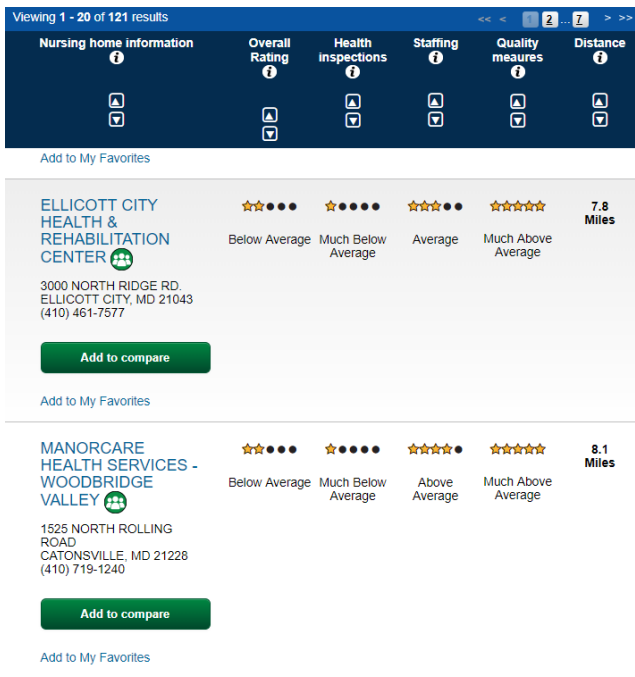


Consumer Satisfaction Ratings of Nursing Homes – What’s Their Role?

Choosing a nursing home for a loved one is hard, and consumers often have little information to work with. They can rely on the facility’s marketing information, visit the facility, or ask friends about their experiences. Hard data, though, is difficult to come by. The federal government aims to fill that gap with its Nursing Home Compare website (<https://www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare/search.html?>), which assigns a star rating that summarizes state survey inspection results, staffing levels, and selected quality measures (see Figure 1). It also assigns an overall star rating for each nursing home.

Example of Information Available on the Nursing Home Compare Website



Viewing 1 - 20 of 121 results

Nursing home information	Overall Rating	Health inspections	Staffing	Quality measures	Distance
ELLICOTT CITY HEALTH & REHABILITATION CENTER 3000 NORTH RIDGE RD. ELLICOTT CITY, MD 21043 (410) 461-7577	Below Average	Much Below Average	Average	Much Above Average	7.8 Miles
MANORCARE HEALTH SERVICES - WOODBRIDGE VALLEY 1525 NORTH ROLLING ROAD CATONSVILLE, MD 21228 (410) 719-1240	Below Average	Much Below Average	Above Average	Much Above Average	8.1 Miles

The bad news, however, is that few consumers use this information, and many see it as unhelpful. Some argue that it would be more useful if consumer perspectives were included: people want to know what residents think about the nursing homes they live in and the staff that serve them, as well as what their family members think. Collecting both resident and family satisfaction systematically through satisfaction surveys is one way to get this information.

The question is -- given the limited resources available to improve quality in nursing homes -- whether investment in consumer satisfaction surveys is worthwhile. Do the surveys capture meaningful information? And if so, should government require nursing homes to collect this information and make the results public?

Arguments for Collecting Consumer Satisfaction Data

Other healthcare providers do it. Increasingly, government is requiring healthcare providers to collect satisfaction data, including hospitals, certified home health agencies, hospice providers, and physician group practices. Indeed, the equivalent to Nursing Home Compare for home health providers (called Home Health Compare) includes satisfaction data in its public reporting. It seems odd that nursing homes are excluded from this trend, particularly given the all-encompassing nature of a nursing home stay, where residents’ experience is such a key part of what makes a nursing home good or bad.

Frustration with other quality measures. It is widely understood that existing measures have serious shortcomings: the quality of information from state surveys, for example, depends significantly on the state’s investment in ensuring that these surveys are done well. Clinical quality indicators are flawed because they rely on nursing homes to report data accurately. Information about complaints and lawsuits also depends heavily on a state’s systems for collecting this information.

Satisfaction provides a different kind of information. The value of existing quality measures depends heavily on how well they reflect overall quality in a given facility. For example, a good facility will not rely heavily on antipsychotic medications to keep residents under control – therefore, information about this datapoint (proportion of residents on antipsychotics) is thought to be useful to consumers. In contrast, satisfaction measures represent a completely different take on the nursing home experience, reflecting how a resident or family member feels about and experiences a facility more globally.

Consumers expect access to user information. In this day and age, consumers expect access to information about other users’ experiences before purchasing a product.

When booking a restaurant, they read up on what people who ate there thought of it. Why would prospective nursing home residents and their families not have such information when making a far more serious purchasing decision?

To promote competition and improve quality. What better way to encourage nursing homes to improve their residents’ experiences than by publicizing when residents – or their family members -- are unhappy with their stay? Even if consumers do not use this information in making purchasing decisions, nursing homes themselves are often acutely aware of how they stack up relative to their competition, which may spur improvement.

Arguments against Collecting Satisfaction Data

It wastes money. Collecting satisfaction data takes time and effort, which might be better spent on other activities. Advocates for nursing home quality have long lists of things that could be done to improve quality – is lobbying for satisfaction data a top priority?

Everyone’s satisfied. Some skeptics argue that satisfaction surveys yield results that seem too uniformly positive – and research backs this up. Research also explains why this is so: respondents (particularly residents) may give good scores because they fear retaliation for a less-than-glowing evaluation. They may give a good rating due to their low expectations going in, or because they are making the best of a bad situation. However, even differences between high rankings can provide useful information.

It encourages the wrong types of behavior. Critics of satisfaction data argue that publicizing satisfaction data, or providing financial incentives to raise satisfaction scores, may mean that providers prioritize the wrong things – spending money on amenities and aesthetics rather than on service, for example – resulting in lower-quality service overall.

Conclusion

Satisfaction data provides different information about nursing home quality than is otherwise available to consumers. Adding such data to the Nursing Home Compare site has the potential to make it more useful and more attractive to potential users – indeed, there have been calls for the government to require nursing homes to collect and report satisfaction data, as several states already do. Advocates for nursing home quality will need to decide whether to make this a policy priority.

Satisfaction is Different from Experience is Different from Quality

Researchers distinguish between *satisfaction* and *experience*. Satisfaction is meant to reflect a person’s overall feelings about the thing they’re assessing – surveys typically ask people “overall, how satisfied are you with X?” or “would you recommend X?” To measure experience, on the other hand, respondents are asked to assess specific aspects of their care, such as how they would rate the food, or how staff treat residents.