HOSPITALS:
Educated Choices

Weighing the right questions and facts can help you make the best decision and improve your outcome.

BY Eric Metcalf, M.P.H.

Peter Frodigh has tried treatment after treatment to cope with back pain that's been tormenting him for years. He's visited physical therapists and tried therapeutic massage. He's had steroids injected near his spine and acupuncture needles poked into his skin.

The 54-year-old Boston financial advisor is saving surgery for the last resort. In the meantime, he's been talking to acquaintances and searching the Internet to find the best surgeon and hospital to handle his case when he’s ready to undergo the procedure to fuse several bones in his lower back.

Experts urge patients to do this kind of homework when planning or considering a medical procedure to make sure they're putting
themselves into the best hands.

"There's a great deal of variability in the quality of care and the outcomes that you as a patient will have, depending on which hospital you choose," says Janet Corrigan, Ph.D., president and CEO of the National Quality Forum, a nonprofit organization that focuses on improving health care quality.

If you're experiencing crushing chest pain or other symptoms of an emergency, your main goal should be to get to a hospital fast. But if you have time to research where you should receive your care, consider these factors when choosing your hospital.

**Ask your primary care provider.** Your regular doctor is probably familiar with your area's medical community and has seen the results of treatments in other patients with problems like yours. "Have a conversation with your physician about which hospital he or she feels is best and why," says Nancy Foster, vice president for quality at the American Hospital Association.

The recommendation should be based on a hospital's quality, not just because your doctor went to school with a physician who works there.

**Check your insurance.** Health plans generally have contracts with hospitals in your area, as well as more distant hospitals that do specialized procedures, says Susan Pisano, spokesperson for America's Health Insurance Plans, an organization that represents health insurers. Make sure before you have the procedure that your insurance will cover both the hospital and any providers who will be treating you, Pisano says. That includes not only the surgeon, but the anesthesiologist or anesthetist, the radiologist, and other providers who will be handling your case.

**Consider the logistics.** Give thought to where the hospital is located. Will someone be available to drive you there and bring you home both after the procedure and for follow-up visits? If you're bringing family or friends with you, will they be able to stay on the hospital grounds or at a nearby hotel?

**Check for certifications.** The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) recommends that patients look for a hospital accredited by The Joint Commission, formerly known as The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.

About 88 percent of hospitals in the United States have this accreditation, according to Mark Pelletier, M.S., R.N., executive director of hospital programs, and accreditation and certification services with the organization.

If a hospital doesn't have that accreditation, it doesn't mean it's bad, he says, but hospitals with this checkmark have shown that they're willing to put time and resources into meeting high expectations. The organization checks hospitals against a variety of standards, including how well they prevent infections, how they manage medications, and how well they meet national goals for patient safety. Visit qualitycheck.org to search for an accredited hospital or call 630-792-5000 for more information.

In addition, check the physician to make sure he's board certified, which means he's gone through a lengthy process to demonstrate his knowledge in a particular field of medicine, Dr. Corrigan suggests. This information is easy to find by asking the doctor or checking online at the American Board of Medical Specialties (abms.org) or the American Board of Physician Specialties (abpsus.org).

**Ask about volume.** Choose a hospital as well as a specialist with plenty of experience in the procedure you're going to have. "Although volume isn't everything, for many procedures you clearly want a surgeon and a hospital team that does it frequently enough, so their skills are fine-tuned," Dr. Corrigan says.

"Being a nurse, that's the stuff I look for. If I needed heart surgery, I'd look to see who's doing the most heart surgeries and what their outcomes are," Pelletier says.

**Make comparisons.** Many of the experts consulted for this story urged patients to head to the Hospital Compare Web site at hospitalcompare.hhs.gov, a resource provided by Medicare, but applicable to adults over 18, says Carolyn Clancy, M.D., the director of the AHRQ. The site allows you to compare specific hospitals using a general search or a search for specific medical conditions or surgical procedures. For example, if you need heart-valve surgery, you can see how many patients were properly given antibiotics to prevent infection and how many patients gave the hospital a high rating or would recommend the hospital to others.
Other important questions and factors include:

- What did patients think of the treatment they received in the hospital? “Whether they felt they had good communication and were treated with respect are factors that patients often ask their friends and neighbors about. If you go to Hospital Compare, you don’t have to lean over the backyard fence—you can look and see how thousands of your neighbors felt about the hospital,” Foster says.

- How often were patients readmitted after they went home? “That tells you whether or not things went smoothly after they left the hospital,” Dr. Corrigan says.

Hospital mortality rates—in other words, how often patients die in the hospital—are also important factors to consider.

Review other rating systems—

with care. It’s not too hard to find a hospital that has landed on some kind of “best-of” list, such as from a regional magazine or a Web site. “A friend told me that at one point, she went to visit a city and saw two billboards literally on opposite sides of the same highway. One said, ‘We’re No. 1 by X source, and the other read, ‘We’re No. 1 according to Y,”’ Dr. Clancy laughs. Don’t take these rankings at face value.

While seeking a back surgeon, Frodigh checked several rating groups, but also visited different candidates and spoke to a number of doctor friends to gather opinions.

If you decide to factor a rating system or “best-of” list into your decision, be sure you know how the organization created its list. An April study from the Annals of Internal Medicine took a look at U.S. News and World Report’s 2009 rankings and found that the top-ranked five hospitals in each specialty were largely based on their so-called reputation score—a highly subjective benchmark that has almost nothing to do with objective measures of quality of care.

Keep your other needs in mind. If you have any dietary, cultural, spiritual, or other special needs from a hospital, check to see how the facility will address them. Pelletier suggests. For example, if you’re interested in complementary or alternative medicine, does the hospital provide such services? If it’s important for you to have family and friends in the room after the procedure, check to see if the hospital allows ample visiting hours.

Ask, ask, ask. Finding the right hospital requires you to do some investigation—the more the better. “If you don’t do anything else, ask questions about your procedure. Ask questions about the doctor. Just ask questions. What we’re finding in our work is that a more informed patient gets better care,” says Jim Conway, a former hospital executive and senior fellow with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

Ask if you really even need the surgery. If so, do you need it now or can it be put off? “Scheduling tends to overwhelm everything, so much that people will say, ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve got you a slot, we can do it Friday.’ That can leave some people feeling like, ‘It’s Wednesday today, it’s really important!’ when actually it’s all about scheduling. People who ask questions and engage that way tend to do better,” says Dr. Clancy.

Frodigh thinks he has finally settled on a surgeon and a hospital for his procedure, when he decides to have it. The surgeon is a Harvard professor and the hospital often attracts professional athletes. In addition, “Every other surgeon I spoke to was ready to put me on the schedule and get me on the table. This guy, I can tell he is really resigned to using surgery as the very last resort.”