

# VIEWPOINTS

## THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

### Public Pressure May Make Hospitals Safer

BY TRUDY LIEBERMAN  
Rural Health News Service

Medicare has just announced it is penalizing more than 700 of the nation's hospitals because they have higher rates of patient safety mishaps, which the government and patient advocacy groups have been trying for years to prevent.

What are those incidents that have resulted in a one percent cut in a hospital's Medicare payments over the year? They are mistakes you wouldn't want to have happen to you or a family member, things like infections caused by incisions made during colon surgeries and hysterectomies, by urinary catheters and by central lines inserted into a large vein to draw blood and administer fluids and medicines.

Those infections cause thousands of deaths each year. Most are preventable and they account for three-fourths of Medicare's safety score. The rest of the assessment is based on eight other complications such as collapsed lungs, broken hips, surgical tears, and wounds that opened.

What's significant is not that so many hospitals apparently are still not taking steps to prevent these common and well-documented harms to patients, but that so many of the hospitals are stars in their communities advertising for local patients. Others are marquee names that advertise their medical prowess nationally.

As I read down the <http://khn.org/news/758-hospitals-penalized-for-patient-safety-in-2016-data-table/> state-by-state roster of those facilities that were penalized, I found hospitals well-known in their regions: Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles; the Denver Health Medical Center; Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago; Indiana University Health in Indianapolis; and the Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Medicare also penalized the Cleveland Clinic and a couple of hospitals in the Mayo Clinic system in Minnesota. Both the Clinic and Mayo are heavy promoters of their brand in an effort to build a national patient base. Some big advertisers in my home state of New York also showed up on the government's list.

But as government data show, spending big bucks to promote the hospital brand doesn't necessarily mean the hospital has a better safety profile.

This is the second year the government has released safety penalties that were authorized by the Affordable Care Act. As you browse through the list of hospitals, you'll see that more than half of those penalized this year also were penalized last year. The ACA requires that one-quarter of the hospitals that can be penalized (VA, children's and critical access hospitals cannot be) will receive some penalty even if all the hospitals improve. Penalizing those in the bottom quarter is a way to encourage continuous quality improvement, explained Jordan Rau who reports on the topic for Kaiser Health News.

And that, of course, brings up the obvious question: Why are so many hospitals this year making the same medical mistakes they made last year especially since the errors are preventable?

The answer is complicated and calls into question a hospital's commitment to safety, a subject I have explored several times with Ashish Jha, professor of public health at the Harvard School of Public Health and one of the country's experts on patient safety. He told me there has been "clear progress" with reductions in surgical site infections and central line infections, which are down 40 to 50 percent nationally. Yet he said that as many as half all hospitals are not using a simple checklist that calls for four steps including hand washing and wearing sterile gloves to cut down on infections.

"The field of patient safety is full of stories about amazing interventions that can save patients' lives but do not end up getting widely adopted," he explained.

"Why?" I asked.

"It really isn't anyone's priority except maybe the patient's," Jha said. "How many times have you heard stories about hospital CEOs getting fired because of the hospital's infection rates? I haven't." He added there's also no evidence that high infection rates or high mortality rates have any effect on CEO salaries.

So what does affect hospital CEO salaries? Is it all those advertising dollars that bring in gobs of new patients and brand recognition? I have no evidence one way or other, but I do know I've interviewed enough families whose relatives suffered harm in a hospital to know that someone should be paying closer attention to preventing preventable infections.

The government's list opens a window into the world of hospital safety. If the public looks through that window, takes notice of the penalties and asks what their local hospitals are doing to correct their deficiencies, that's a start at cleaning up the problem.

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*What has been your experience with hospital-acquired infections? Write to Trudy at [trudy.lieberman@gmail.com](mailto:trudy.lieberman@gmail.com).*



## “Whatsuuuuup” For The Holidays

BY PAULA DAMON

There are plenty of holiday pros and cons. Pluses and negatives seem to be a part of everything we do this time of year. Here are some of the things I've noticed this season...

**Pro:** Once again, deliciously creamy, rich eggnog is on the grocer's shelves.

**Con:** An eight-ounce glass has 343 calories, 33.4 grams of carbs, 21.4 grams of sugar, 150 milligrams of cholesterol and 19 grams of fat.

**Pro:** Santa's available for photo sessions at the mall.

**Con:** He's also ringing a bell at the door and you see him again at your next two stops. Try explaining that to the kids.

**Pro:** You're excited to decorate the house with last year's holiday lights.

**Con:** When you plug them in, only half work and the ones that do aren't very bright.

**Pro:** The neighborhood is looking a lot like Christmas.

**Con:** The local Clark Griswold lives directly across the street. He turned on his lights in October and won't turn them off until sometime in February. The intensity of the experience is keeping the kids up at night, giving you migraines and creating power outages.

**Pro:** There are tons of 50-percent-off gifts.

**Con:** They're marked up 80 percent, so in reality you're paying the regular price.

**Pro:** You look forward to having the family over for the holidays.

**Con:** By the time they arrive, you're exhausted after getting and wrapping gifts, deep cleaning the



PAULA  
DAMON

house,

preparing a huge meal, setting the table and herding them like cats to a single place and

vacation, you're ready to send them back.

**Pro:** You enjoy selecting a meaningful gift for your child's preschool teacher.

**Con:** When you ask for ideas, your preschooler suggests, "A gate for Sam, so he doesn't keep escaping the classroom."

**Pro:** There are so many festive Christmas choral concerts.

**Con:** Several individuals in the audience don't bother turning off or silencing their phones. Loud ring tones with "Whatsuuuuup" and Donald Duck quacking "Deck the Halls" keep upstaging the performance.

**Pro:** You decide to buy your grandchild an old-fashioned toy with no plugs or batteries.

**Con:** She tries swiping it with her hand, asking how to turn it on.

**Pro:** You share the story of Jesus' birth with the little ones.

**Con:** They say Santa is better than Jesus because he rides on a sleigh, lives at the North Pole, fills their stockings with goodies, leaves presents under the tree and lets them sit on his lap.

**Pro:** You say Jesus is everywhere, walks on water, supplies all your needs, resides in their hearts, holds them in His arms.

**Con:** They don't have a clue as to what you're talking about.

**Pro:** The kids will be out of school for the holiday break.

**Con:** Less than 24 hours into their Christmas

house, preparing a huge meal, setting the table and herding them like cats to a single place and

vacation, you're ready to send them back.

**Pro:** You enjoy selecting a meaningful gift for your child's preschool teacher.

**Con:** When you ask for ideas, your preschooler suggests, "A gate for Sam, so he doesn't keep escaping the classroom."

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*Paula Bosco Damon is a national award-winning writer whose columns appear weekly in regional newspapers in the Upper Midwest. The author conducts readings of her works and writing workshops for beginning writers. For more information, email [boscodamon,paula@gmail.com](mailto:boscodamon,paula@gmail.com).*

## NEVER FORGET

Seventy-one years ago this month, in December 1944, the 101st Airborne was under siege at the Belgian town of Bastogne. The Germans had mounted a surprise Ardennes Offensive on December 16th with overwhelming numbers of troops and mechanized forces. Their attack quickly focused on the critical crossroads town of Bastogne, defended by the 101st Airborne and other broken units that straggled in. U.S. forces were totally surrounded and threatened with annihilation by a far superior enemy force.

The outlook was grim. Incessant rain and overcast skies prevented Allied air support from pounding enemy strongholds in the area, which was critical for a major counterattack.

Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., Commander of the Third Army, requested Chaplain James O'Neill to compose a prayer. The 101st was in a desperate position at Bastogne, and Patton's Third Army needed clear skies to disengage the enemy in their present position, and turn north to attack the Germans and relieve the 101st. O'Neill said to have questioned that it was not customary to pray for clear weather "to kill fellow men." Patton's response was direct: "Chaplain, are you teaching me theology or are you the Chaplain of the Third Army. I want a prayer." O'Neill said, "Yes Sir." And the rest was history. (Source: James O'Neill notes, [digitalsurvivors.com](http://digitalsurvivors.com))

Patton ordered 250,000 prayer cards printed up - one for every member of the Third Army. The 664th Engineer Topographical Company worked day and night to reproduce the cards. The distribution, December 12-14, was overseen by Adjutant General, Col Robert S. Cummings.

On December 20th the rain suddenly ceased and the fog lifted over Bastogne, much to the surprise of American weather forecasters. "Bright, clear skies and perfect flying weather" brought American planes, "tens, hundreds, and thousands," to decimate the enemy, knocking out "hundreds of tanks" and killing thousands of enemy troops, harassing German reinforcements, and finally "driving the Germans home." Patton's prayer was answered.

This famous prayer read: "Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations."

On the back side of the small card, Patton offered a Christmas greeting to his troops: "To each officer and soldier in the Third United States Army, I wish a Merry Christmas. I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. May God's blessing rest upon each of you on this Christmas Day."

**G. S. Patton, Jr.  
Lieutenant General  
Commanding, Third  
United States Army"**

BERNIE D. HENDRICKS,  
BROOKINGS

## FROM THE PULPIT

### Advent: What Are We Waiting For?

BY DEACON DENNY DAVIS  
St. Agnes Parish

As Christians, during this Advent season, we are called to choose between two gods. The first is the god of materialism. "If I just get this gift I will be happy." This is the god of illusion. It says that the accumulation of stuff will fill the emptiness inside us.

The second God is the God of life; a new life we can experience through God's Son. The incarnation is God breaking into our history as a human being to expose our addic-

tion to consumerism and call us all into a journey of faith which Jesus called the "Reign of God." This is what our hearts and souls are waiting for. Jesus was born to us for one reason, to usher in the Kingdom of God.

This great historical event however, has been watered down in our churches as waiting for the 'baby Jesus.' We have reduced the most important event in human history to sentimentality and a man with a white beard in a red suit saying "going to find out who's naughty or nice." Is this who our God is?

Of course the god of stuff does serve a purpose, which is to shield us from the reality that the gospel spells out for us. Half the world is starving or in poverty, the death penalty in our state, the stranger among us, this muddy messy world.

In Chapter 17 of Luke's gospel Jesus says, "The coming of the kingdom of God does not admit to observation and there will be no one to say, Look here! Look there! For you must know, the kingdom of God is among you." (Lk. 17: 21-22)

This is the reality that we

are all waiting for. This kingdom is already here, if we only have eyes to see. Angelus Silesius, a 17th century mystic wrote: "If in your heart you make a Manger for his birth, then God will once again become a child on earth. It all depends on you."

An Advent prayer: O Wisdom, O holy Word of God: Come and save these creatures you fashioned from the dust. O, Emmanuel, God-With-Us, King and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people: Come and set us free.

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