

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-741](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

To help veterans make informed choices about their care, the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (Choice Act) directs VA to publicly report applicable health care quality measures for its medical facilities on HHS's Hospital Compare website and on VA's own website.

The Choice Act also contains provisions for GAO to review the health care quality measures VA publicly reports. In this report, GAO 1) describes the quality measures VA reports on *Hospital Compare* and its own website; 2) evaluates VA's reporting of quality measures on its website; and 3) examines the extent to which VA has assessed the accuracy of the quality measures it publicly reports. GAO reviewed the quality measures VA publicly reports, reviewed studies and interviewed VA officials about the accuracy and completeness of the clinical information used to calculate the measures, and assessed the presentation and relevance of VA's information on quality of care using criteria identified in previous GAO work to evaluate health care websites.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA 1) report a broader range of health care quality measures in an accessible and understandable way on its website and 2) conduct a systematic assessment of the patient clinical information across VAMCs to ensure its accuracy and completeness. VA concurred with GAO's first recommendation and concurred in principle with the second recommendation, and described steps to implement the recommendations.

View [GAO-17-741](#). For more information, contact Randall Williamson at (202) 512-7114 or williamsonr@gao.gov.

September 2017

VA HEALTH CARE QUALITY

VA Should Improve the Information It Publicly Reports on the Quality of Care at Its Medical Facilities

What GAO Found

As of June 2017, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) publicly reported 35 health care quality measures on the *Hospital Compare* website, which is maintained by the Department of Health and Human Services. Veterans can use information on this website to compare the performance of VA medical centers (VAMC) and non-VA hospitals on a common set of quality measures. Those measures include patient reports of their experience of care, such as how well doctors and nurses communicated with them, and actual outcomes of care, such as readmissions to the hospital. On its own website, VA reported 110 quality measures, including some of the same measures reported on *Hospital Compare*. VA also reports quality measures not found on *Hospital Compare*, such as measures of how long veterans must wait to access care at VAMCs.

VA reports health care quality measures on two separate webpages of its website. VA launched the *Access and Quality* webpage in April 2017, which according to VA officials is the primary source of information for veterans on the quality of care at VAMCs. GAO found that this information is generally presented in a way that is accessible and easy to understand. However, GAO also found that the primary webpage provides information from a small subset—15—of the 110 measures VA reports on its website as of June 2017. Most of the other measures are available on a second, older webpage that resides elsewhere on VA's website and is generally not easily accessible and understandable. Until VA can provide information on a broader range of health care measures and services and present this information in a way that is easily accessible and understandable, VA cannot ensure that its website is functioning as intended in helping veterans make informed choices about their care.

Within VA, VA Central Office is responsible for calculating the health care quality measures that VA publicly reports for each of its VAMCs and ensuring that these measures provide accurate information on the VAMCs' quality of care. However, GAO found that VA Central Office has not systematically assessed the completeness and accuracy of the underlying clinical information that is used to calculate these measures. This clinical information is recorded in veterans' medical records and includes diagnoses given and treatments provided. Several studies have found potential problems with the accuracy and completeness of this clinical information at some VAMCs. For example, a 2015 independent assessment conducted by McKinsey & Company found that VA's clinical documentation procedures are below industry standards and that many VAMCs do not have programs in place to improve clinical documentation practices. VA Central Office officials told GAO that they have not systematically assessed the completeness and accuracy of the clinical information across VAMCs and the extent to which this affects the accuracy of its quality measures because they have focused on other priorities. However, the lack of such an assessment is inconsistent with federal standards for internal controls related to information and monitoring. As a result, VA does not have assurance that the quality measures it publicly reports on *Hospital Compare* and its own website accurately reflect the performance of its VAMCs and provide veterans with the information they need to make informed choices about their care.