31 October 2016

**Knowing doctors’ death rates can’t help you avoid a bad surgeon**

By **New Scientist staff and Press Association**

Publishing the performance data of thousands of surgeons is no help to those hoping to avoid going under the knife of a bad surgeon.

A review of death rates has found that even a surgeon whose scores are deemed “acceptable” may actually have had a high rate of needless deaths among their patients.

In 2013, a website was launched in the UK that enabled people to examine the data of individual surgeons, such as the proportion of their patients that died within 90 days of surgery. The UK health minister Jeremy Hunt said the website, called My NHS, would drive better care and could save lives.

But critics say that death rates are too crude a measure for assessing a surgeon’s performance, and in 2015, heart surgeons wrote to NHS England, asking for a rethink of the policy. They said that publishing death rates in this way was motivating some colleagues to avoid doing risky operations.

|  |
| --- |
|  |

**Far too few**

Now researchers have examined the death rates for inpatients for six common procedures between 2010 and 2014. They found that this data was not enough to be able to work out which of the surgeons had an above-average death rate, because each individual surgeon does not perform enough procedures.

For example, when it comes to hip replacements, [weight-loss procedures](https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20327241-100-full-without-food-can-surgery-cure-obesity/) and thyroidectomy, fewer than 20 per cent of surgeons with death rates five times higher than the national average would be detectable using the current system.

Each hip replacement surgeon would need to carry out 500 hip replacements every year if just one failing surgeon was to be detected. At present, they perform about 48 to 75 operations per year.

“Publishing surgeons’ mortality rates is a step towards transparency in medical care, but it offers little help in identifying poor performance,” said [Ewen Harrison](http://www.ed.ac.uk/surgery/staff/surgical-profiles/ewen-harrison), at the University of Edinburgh, who worked on the analysis. “We must use this data as part of a wider initiative to keep the quality of care in UK hospitals high.”

The team is calling for more focus on tracking how patients recover after surgery, as well as measuring their satisfaction. As death rates for surgical procedures continue to fall, measuring death rates will become even less useful for assessing surgeons, they say.

Journal reference: *BMJ Open*, DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012471

Read more: [Death rate drops when top heart surgeons are away](https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22530032-100-death-rate-drops-when-top-heart-surgeons-are-away/)