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HealthGrades Launches First National Physician Malpractice Database for the Public

Records include data from fifteen states, including New York and California, and are available to the public at Healthgrades.com

Public access to physician quality information remains limited, however, as 35 states and the federal government choose not to report malpractice data to the public

GOLDEN, Colo. (March 27, 2007) – HealthGrades, the nation’s leading independent health care ratings company, has compiled the first national database of physician malpractice records available to the public. Detailed information on medical malpractice judgments, settlements and arbitration awards against physicians in fifteen states is now available on-line, at www.healthgrades.com, as part of HealthGrades’ physician quality reports for consumers.

The database combines, for the first time, all available public malpractice records. It also includes the amount or range of payment and whether the resolution was a judgment, settlement, or the result of arbitration. In HealthGrades data set, approximately three percent of physicians have a malpractice settlement or judgment on their record over the years 2001-2005. That number is likely higher as HealthGrades data is based on state records, some of which contain thresholds for reporting claims.

While a malpractice settlement or judgment on a physician’s record is not always an indication of poor quality medical care, malpractice records can play a critical role in helping consumers avoid potentially harmful medical errors. Seventy percent of consumers say the biggest help to them in determining the quality of a physician is malpractice information, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Nearly three-quarters of Americans worry more about experiencing a medical mistake than an in-flight error on an airplane

Most physicians who have experienced a malpractice judgment or settlement are still practicing without disciplinary action by a state medical board, a set of information already available in HealthGrades’ physician reports. Of the 35,000 doctors who have had two or more malpractice payouts since 1990, only 7.6 percent of them have been disciplined, and only 13 percent of doctors with five medical malpractice payouts have been disciplined, according to data from the National Practitioner Data Bank, a government malpractice database not available to the general public.

Yet, until now, the public has had only limited access to physician malpractice judgment and settlement data, primarily through the individual state agencies that report the information.

“Now consumers have access to all available physician malpractice information in one place, helping them identify doctors who may have trouble spots in their past -- even if the physician currently practices in a state where malpractice information is not publicly reported,” said Sarah Loughran, HealthGrades executive vice president.

But challenges remain in increasing consumers’ access to physician malpractice records. For example, among the states that do report physician malpractice data, there is wide variation in how much information is provided, and how long it stays on a physician’s record.

“We commend the states that report this important information and we are pleased to provide this to the consumers searching for doctors using HealthGrades. But huge gaps in our knowledge of malpractice activity remain,” Loughran said. “We encourage the 35 states that do not report malpractice data and the federal government to consider making this valuable information available to consumers.”

HealthGrades has added malpractice data for physicians in the following states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, North Dakota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Tennessee, Virginia, Vermont and West Virginia.

In HealthGrades data set, the five medical specialties with the highest percentage of malpractice incidents are, in rank order: Bariatric Surgery, Maternal Fetal Medicine, Neurosurgery, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Cardiothoracic Surgery.

The malpractice information is being added to what is already the most robust online resource for consumers researching physicians. The physician-quality reports that HealthGrades offers to consumers on nearly every practicing physician in the country – about 700,000 – contain data on their medical training, board certification, sanctions by medical boards in any of the 50 states, quality ratings of nearby hospitals, patient-satisfaction ratings and more.

Approximately three million individuals use HealthGrades each month to research and select doctors, hospitals and other healthcare providers.

About HealthGrades

Health Grades, Inc. (Nasdaq: HGRD) is the leading healthcare ratings organization, providing ratings and profiles of hospitals, nursing homes and physicians. Millions of consumers and many of the nation’s largest employers, health plans and hospitals rely on HealthGrades’ independent ratings and decision-support resources to make healthcare decisions based on the quality of care. More information on the company can be found at <http://www.healthgrades.com>.

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Editor’s note: HealthGrades’ physician malpractice data is available at no charge to members of the working press. For more information contact Scott Shapiro at sshapiro@healthgrades.com.