

MONDAY, April 2 (HealthDay News) -- Patient safety incidents in U.S. hospitals increased by three percent overall from 2003 to 2005, and the error gap between the nation's best- and worst-performing hospitals remained wide, a report released Monday found.

America's top rated centers had 40 percent lower rates of medical errors than the poorest-performing hospitals, the study showed.

The fourth annual HealthGrades Patient Safety in American Hospitals Study, put out by HealthGrades, an independent health care ratings company, examined over 40 million Medicare hospitalization records at almost 5,000 hospitals from 2003 to 2005.

The study found that:

There were 1.16 million patient safety incidents among Medicare patients during the three years of the study. That works out to an incidence rate of 2.86 percent.

During those three years, there were 247,662 potentially preventable deaths in U.S. hospitals. Medicare patients involved in one or more safety incidents had a 25 percent chance of dying.

The excess cost to Medicare associated with patient safety incidents was \$8.6 billion from 2003 to 2005.

Ten of 16 types of patient-safety incidents increased over the three years of the study, by an average of almost 12 percent. The greatest increases were in post-operative sepsis (about 34.3 percent); post-operative respiratory failure (18.7 percent); and selected infections due to medical care (about 12.2 percent).

Incidents with the highest occurrence rates were decubitus ulcer; failure to rescue; and post-operative respiratory failure. If all hospitals had performed at the same level as the top-rated hospitals, about 206,286 patient safety incidents and 34,393 Medicare patient deaths could have been avoided, resulting in \$1.74 billion in savings.

"The cost of medical errors at American hospitals in both mortality and dollar terms continues to be significant, and the 'chasm in quality' between the nation's top and bottom hospitals, which HealthGrades has documented in this and other studies, remains," the study's primary author, Dr. Samantha Collier, HealthGrades' chief medical officer, said in a prepared statement.

"But the nation's best-performing hospitals are providing benchmarks for the hospital industry, exercising a vigilance that resulted in far fewer in-hospital incidents among the Medicare patients studied," Collier said.