

## Health care report lauds Dubuque

### Study says the local hospitals are among the best at providing cost-effective treatment

By [ERIK HOGSTROM TH](#) staff writer

Dubuque has earned Top 3 marks for cost-effective health care, according to a recently released report.

A Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice report, "Tracking the Care of Patients with Severe Chronic Illness," suggests that health-care institutions that give better care can do so at a lower cost because they don't over-treat patients.

The study specifically looked at costs spent caring for people with chronic disease, which accounts for more than 75 percent of all health-care spending. Such costs increase during the last two years of a chronically ill patient's life, but health outcomes often do not improve.

Study results are compiled in the latest Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care.

Study authors named Dubuque one of the three most cost-effective areas in the country, along with Mason City, Iowa, and La Crosse, Wis.

"I think what the study shows is that whether or not unnecessary health care spending occurs in the last two years of life depends largely on the region of the country you live in," said John Knox, president and chief executive officer for The Finley Hospital. "It also suggests that areas with a large number of physicians, physician specialists and excess hospital beds are more expensive providers of care in the last years of life."

Knox added that Medicare reimbursement is partly to blame for this because it pays physicians based on the number of patients seen and procedures performed.

"There is no incentive to coordinate care or provide less when the costs outweigh the benefits," he said.

Study authors found health-care spending is consuming an increasingly larger proportion of America's gross national product each year, but found little evidence the amount spent is producing better outcomes for patients.

"We avoid providing excessive testing and care that will not positively impact the patient's outcome, and we have been focusing on following research-based best practice care," Knox said.

Dubuque's cost-effective recognition did not surprise Russell Knight, president and chief executive officer of Mercy Medical Center-Dubuque. Mercy was recognized a little over a year ago as being in the top 1 percent in the country for quality and efficiency.

"We have worked hard to understand best (medical) practices and basing (treatment) decisions on solid evidence, so that enables us to avoid overuse, under-use and misuse of resources, all of which costs money and reduces quality," Knight said.

He also credits locally coordinated care for keeping a lid on costs.

Nationally, total Medicare reimbursements per hospitalized enrollee during the last two years of life averaged \$52,837. Iowa's average was \$39,242, Finley averaged \$38,696 and Mercy \$32,403.

There is another side to Dubuque's fiscal responsibility -- fiscal constraints.

"Here in Dubuque we are forced to live within what Medicare pays us," Knight said. "We are forced to be creative and resourceful."

Iowa traditionally receives less Medicare reimbursement than other states, routinely finding itself on the bottom of the list of states.