

# Quality Measures— Getting at What Really Matters

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**T**he new version of *Best Doctors in America®* is out for 2008. These days its appearance is cause for an article in the local community magazine listing all the local docs awarded “best doctor” status in the new volume. Your hospital (if you’re a part of it) gives out kudos and may do a newspaper ad listing all its docs who are included.

I’ve often wondered what this means and whether there is any such thing as the “best doctor” in any specialty and specifically in orthopedic surgery. In sports medicine we seem always to try to find ways to measure our value. Is it based on the number of college and professional teams we take care of? Is it the number of high-profile and elite athletes who sit in our waiting rooms? Perhaps that is the way we define ourselves as practitioners because, certainly, only the best would be providing care in such a setting and to such important athletes. Or is it because in sports the winner defines the “best,” and there is no room for other categories of success in this black-and-white/all-or-nothing appraisal. Too often “best” is defined by the sports doctor’s publicist or marketing expert.

But does that mean we do anything better than the general orthopedist who takes care of active, working people who need his help just as much as, perhaps more so than, the elite athlete, who often has never lived in a real-world situation since childhood? I wonder why some are viewed as the “best” and others not. Is there any way to say I’m better than the non-AOSSM (American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine) or non-AANA (Arthroscopy Association of North America) member who didn’t do a fellowship and sees a “civilian population”? I think not. It’s a likely bet that the same hardworking practitioner caring for the general public is too busy to belong to large numbers of professional societies, but, even so, takes the time to complete the CME activity at those same societies’ courses.



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What’s my point? Well, I think these designations miss the definition of quality of doctors and, furthermore, that there is no such animal as a “best doctor.” These designations are politically defined by who you know and what power group you’re in; not by the quality of patient care you provide. I’ve always felt that the best doctors in sports medicine are those unsung heroes who go out on Friday and Saturday nights to high school and junior college contests, anonymously, without even the certainty they will get to care for the athletes they are safeguarding. To me they are the real “best doctors.”

The American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery (ABOS) struggles to find a way to really credential a doctor; however, the best it can do is determine an adequate knowledge base. There is no way to really know that the person they pass will be a “best doctor” or even perform as an average doctor, because there is a disconnect between the knowledge-testing process and the actual practice of medicine. Moreover, the ABOS still has no way to assess surgical skills and, of course, that determines a large part of outcomes for the orthopedic patient. The Board has taken a mighty step forward in the Maintenance of Certification process. This will ensure ongoing and regular evaluation of knowledge in a dynamic process that involves corrective action to determine the CME needed to fulfill the requirements. Furthermore, the orthopedist will need to show some evidence of outcomes and the relationship between his results and both the literature and the patient’s desires. It isn’t enough to have knowledge and surgical skills; we must also critically evaluate our own results. Too often the “best” is defined by technical skills, not by outcomes.

Winston Churchill said, “It is no use saying we are doing our best. We must do what is necessary.” Maybe that is the definition of the so many unrecognized “best doctors.” They are the ones who do what is necessary to provide their patients with the best care possible. I like that perspective. I wish all the hardworking orthopedists who commit to this goal would get the credit they deserve. ■

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