

Dr. Lee in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* :

Elizabeth Koob had just had a hysterectomy at 8 a.m. on New Year's Eve last year.

But as nightfall approached, her doctors at Mercy Fairfield Hospital gave her a choice: She could go home or spend the night at the hospital.

So Koob left at 8:30 p.m. that Thursday and returned to her home in Mason. Four days later, she was driving her daughter to a basketball game.

"I kind of thought I'd be staying overnight," said Koob, 46. "But I didn't feel like I was getting any benefit and I'd rather be at home."

Koob is an unusual case. Only a decade ago, a hysterectomy commonly kept women in the hospital for a week, and the average patient stay today is about two days. She is the first hysterectomy patient at Mercy Fairfield to be discharged the same day.

But her 12-hour hospital stay symbolizes one of the intractable movements in health care, as hospitals and insurance companies work to drive down their costs, in part through driving down the number of nights the average patient occupies a bed.

Last year the average hospital stay at Mercy Fairfield was 3.52 days excluding maternity, the lowest among 34 hospitals owned by parent company, downtown-based Catholic Healthcare Partners. Six of those are in Greater Cincinnati.

"It's better for the patient if we're able to get them out of the hospital in an appropriate way," Mercy Fairfield President Tom Urban said. "But that's about as low as you can go. That is best in class."

Comparing hospitals is difficult because they have different specialties. For example, Christ Hospital in Mount Auburn, nationally known for its cardiac care programs, has an average stay of 4.58 days and has set a goal of lowering that to 4.2 days.

In the wonky bureaucracy of 21st-century health care, hospitals and doctors and insurance companies track dozens of quality and financial

measures, all in an effort to move millions of patients through the complex system while holding down cost increases.

"Length of stay" is only one of more than two dozen quality measures tracked by CHP and by hospital companies across the country. Others include financial measures such as revenue growth and clinical data such as the reduction in mortality rates and bedsores acquired in the hospital.

The quicker you get a patient healthier, hospital leaders say, the quicker they go home and the less money everybody spends.

That's why the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services now tracks many of the same metrics. It has stopped reimbursing hospitals for about a half-dozen conditions acquired in the hospital, such as bedsores, and the agency is moving toward basing payments on the numbers.

"It's really a departure from the way we used to think about health care, particularly hospital care," said Jane Crowley, executive vice president at Catholic Healthcare Partners.

'Creating' 85 beds

The downtown-based company has been more successful than most. Last year it was named among the 10 highest-performing hospital companies in the country for quality and efficiency by the market-watcher Thomson Reuters. The list also included the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati, which is breaking up as several hospitals withdraw.

CHP said it can use the savings to re-invest in new technology, research labs and new patient beds. In Koob's case, her doctor, Julia Lee, used a new da Vinci robotic device to help with the surgery. Lee is a doctor at OB/Gyn Associates, with offices in Fairfield and West Chester.

Lee said the machine is more precise and minimizes blood loss, enabling patients to recover more quickly.

In Koob's case, the patient felt fine and didn't want to be resting in the hospital when she could rest at home.

"People want to be at home as soon as they can," Lee said.

By increasing the efficiency of how it moves patients into and out of the hospital, Mercy Fairfield has "virtually created" 85 beds in the 250-bed hospital in last two years. That has helped reduce waiting times in the emergency room, with nearly three-quarters of patients not having to wait for a room.

Shortening hospital stays obviously helps shave costs. An extra day at Mercy Fairfield costs an average of \$2,317.

With the new health care reform bill signed into law last week, hospitals will face big cuts in federal Medicare reimbursements, another reason to reduce their own costs.

In 2009, Mercy Fairfield spent about \$5,542 per case. As a company, CHP cut total expenses by about \$23 million during its 2008-09 fiscal year, while revenue from patients stayed level at nearly \$2 billion.

Average hospital stays at Mercy Fairfield

Hysterectomy: 1.79 days

Heart attack: 4.77 days

Appendectomy: 1.98 days

Vaginal delivery: 2.31 days

Cesarean section: 3.17 days

Hospitals cannot reduce maternity stays significantly because of a 1996 law that requires insurers to pay for at least a 48-hour hospital stay after the birth for a vaginal delivery, and 96 hours for a cesarean section. A mother can be discharged earlier than that but an insurer cannot require it.