A Big “Plus” for Hospital’s Spine Program

University of Colorado Hospital’s spine surgery program is the only one in Colorado to earn the top rating of one of the state’s largest insurers.

Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) recently named the hospital a “Blue Distinction Center + for Spine Surgery” for 2013. While BCBS has named eight hospitals in the state Blue Distinction Centers, only UCH has earned the + designation for its attention to patient safety and outcomes, as well as cost-of-care measures in its surgical procedures.

To earn the rating, the spine program submitted data to BCBS showing its surgical volumes, types of cases, and outcomes, including length of stay, complications, readmissions and morbidity rates, said Michael Torpey, manager of the Spine and Rehabilitation Medicine Practice at UCH.

The program also had to show it provides comprehensive inpatient surgical services, including discectomies, fusions and decompressions, as well as multidisciplinary team care.

The data-gathering effort required strong collaboration between the Spine team and the Clinical Excellence and Patient Safety Department, noted Kimberly Meyers, UCH’s executive director of Neurosciences and Spine and Rehabilitation Medicine.

Meyers said BCBS evaluated quality data the hospital submitted related to the Surgical Care Improvement Project (SCIP), as well as rates for central line-associated bloodstream infections; sepsis; ventilator-associated pneumonia; venous thromboembolisms; surgical site infections; dural tears; and readmission and reoperation rates.

In addition, BCBS combined the quality data with claims data and reviewed the information to assess how efficiently the Spine program delivered surgical care.

“The combination of surgical expertise and efficiency earned us the rare ‘Distinction Center +’ rating,” Meyers said.

The number and complexity of surgical cases the program handles counted in the program’s favor, Torpey said. But he stressed that neurological surgery and orthopedic surgery are part of a “triangular model of care” that stresses both surgical and rehabilitation services.

“Not all centers have all three pieces of the puzzle,” he said.

Avoiding the knife. While the Distinction Center + ranking illuminates its surgical expertise, the Spine program takes a conservative approach to care, attempting first to restore patients to health through rehabilitation — a key to maintaining patient safety as well as prudently controlling costs, Torpey said. And while providers can handle tough surgical cases, such as repair of severe scoliosis and spinal tumors, the program also offers an array of minimally invasive procedures that often allow patients to leave the hospital the same day as their surgeries.

The go-slow approach is a hallmark of the program, agreed Venu Akuthota, MD, medical director of the Spine Center and vice chairman of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

“Ninety percent of patients get better without surgery,” he said.

“Our instinct is to treat spine problems with non-surgical means

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first. If patients need surgery, the designation shows they get high-quality care and that we provide necessary support during and after surgery.”

The distinction makes the hospital a preferred provider within the BCBS network, Torpey said, and the spine program wants to let the wider world know of its status.

Working with the hospital’s Marketing Department, the spine team has created a variety of printed materials bearing the “Blue Distinction Center + for Spine Surgery” seal, including posters, trifold brochures, cards, patient and caregiver guides, and a nationally distributed neurosciences outcomes book. All of the materials will be available soon, said UCHealth Marketing Strategist Rick Plummer.

The designation figures to help the spine program make inroads in the patient and referring provider communities, Torpey concluded. “The award speaks to our expertise, efficiency and ability to deliver collaborative care.”