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HERC Releases Guide to Provider Data

A new guidebook describes VA data on health care providers. Although provider data can be valuable in research on health care efficiency and outcomes, it has been difficult to use and not well documented.

This new HERC guidebook describes provider-related variables in VA files of outpatient visits, inpatient encounters, primary care team assignments, hospital discharges, prescription fills, and laboratory and radiology orders. A key development was the release of the VA National Health Care Practitioner Database, also documented in the new guide.

Provider data can be accessed only by VA employees who have permission to use the VA Austin Information Technology Center. If the data are used for research, the study must be approved by a human subjects institutional review board and by a VA Research and Development Committee.

Provider information can be used to evaluate interventions directed at providers. It is useful in studies of the relationship between provider characteristics and health efficiency and quality. It can be used to control for the correlation between patients seen by the same provider.

The new HERC guide describes the different formats of the VA provider identification number. The number has 18 digits in most files, but only 11 digits in DSS files. The guide includes programming statement to convert between the two formats.

The provider identifier number is assigned by the facility, and providers who work at multiple facilities have one number for each facility. The National Health Care Practitioner Database includes provider's name, encrypted social security number, and the identification numbers for all facilities where the provider practices.

Several VA files report a code for provider type. This code distinguishes different medical specialties, residents and interns, types of nursing staff, and different types of therapists.

The "Guide to VA Data on Health Care Providers" can be found at guidebook can be found on the HERC intranet site. HERC has also created an FAQ on provider data: http://www.herc.research.va.gov/resources/faq_i11.asp.

Results from HERC's Needs Assessment Survey

More than 400 VA researchers responded last month to a survey on their use of health economics data, documentation, and training provided by the Health Economics Resource Center (HERC). "We are very grateful to all who took the survey," said HERC director Paul Barnett. "Their suggestions for how we can improve HERC products were very helpful." Barnett said that the survey results are being reviewed by the HERC steering committee and will be used to develop the HERC strategic plan for the next five years.

Survey respondents reported that the VA Decision Support System (DSS) is their most important source of cost data, with 75% answering that they now use these data or plan to use them in the next five years. Among respon-

dents who reported current or planned use of DSS datasets, nearly half (48%) indicated that HERC-created tabulations of DSS, like the discharge-level file of DSS inpatient costs by category of care, is important to their research.

More than half of survey respondents (57%) were using or planned to use data on the cost of VA contract care, the Fee Basis system. The average cost data, annual estimates of all VA hospital stays and treatments visits prepared by HERC using Medicare reimbursement weights, were important to 48% who took the survey. Other important sources of cost data included direct measurement via micro-costing (34%), the VA payroll data base (31%), and the Medicare index of geographic variation in health care wages, which was of interest to 27%.

HERC's cyber seminars and courses continue to be popular with 61% of respondents reporting occasional or frequent attendance; 40% indicated occasional or frequent review of HERC's VA Health Economics Bulletin.

HERC used an online survey tool to assess the needs of its customers. Over 1,200 were asked to participate during the survey period, which ran from June 27 to July 22. One-third of respondents (34%) completed at least one question on the survey and 26% completed the survey from start to finish. About 75% of respondents have been with VA for more than five years, while 79% are involved with VA research.

Quick Links to HERC Resources

- **Training** – cyber seminars and courses (<http://www.herc.research.va.gov/training/default.asp>)
- **Publications** – guidebooks and technical reports (<http://www.herc.research.va.gov/publications/default.asp>)
- **Data** – tabulations and proc contents (<http://www.herc.research.va.gov/data/default.asp>)

HERC Organizes Fee Basis Discussion Group



Researchers who use Fee Basis data are invited to join in a discussion of this complex set of files. The discussion group will be chaired by Ciaran Phibbs. He has been characterizing the fee basis care provided to women veterans. Phibbs hopes that researchers who use the files can exchange information about what they have learned, and that this can be used to improve the HERC documentation on these files.

Fee Basis services are non-VA health care sponsored by VA. The Fee Basis files characterize this care and the amount that VA paid for it. The files have information on a wide variety of services including hospital stays, ambulatory surgeries, physician services, care from other health care providers, and travel reimbursements to veterans. Fee basis care now accounts for more than 10% of VA health care costs.

For more information, see the HERC guide to fee basis care on the HERC Guidebooks web page at http://www.herc.research.va.gov/files/BOOK_648.pdf and the HERC technical report #26, "Use and Cost of Fee Basis Services in FY2007" on the VA intranet. The HERC web site has the contents of the eight annual fee files produced since 2000.

For information on how to participate in the fee basis discussion, please contact Angela Fan of HERC at Angela.fan@va.gov.

New Veteran Geographic Data Source

For more information, contact the Planning Systems Support Group (PSSG).

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<http://vaww.pssg.med.va.gov/>

The Planning Systems Support Group (PSSG) provides both mapping and analytical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) assistance for the Office of Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy Planning.

A new dataset provides better information to support studies of health care access, travel, and demand for health services.

Researchers can now access data with the ZIP code of Veterans enrolled in VHA. This data set is updated quarterly using information from the VA files and the US Postal Service National Change of Address file. The data set classifies the rurality of enrollee residence using the VA designation as urban, rural, or highly rural (URH) and also includes congressional district, county/state (FIPS) codes, and other variables of interest. Other fields on the fiscal year (FY)-end files include estimated travel distances and travel times to the nearest VA facility that provides primary, secondary, and tertiary care. For over 80% of the records, these variables are based on the exact residential address; the remaining records assign rural status and travel distance based on the centroid of the residence zip code. The file does not include patients' names or the addresses that are used to make these assignments. PSSG strongly encourages users to use the URH variable to assign rural status, rather than Zip code, for patients included in the enrollment files. According to PSSG, an address is assigned to URH based on whether it is in a metropolitan area as defined by the U.S. Census. Some zip codes include addresses that are in both urban and rural areas.

This information may be used for studies that have been approved by a Human Subjects review panel with analysts who have permission to use medical SAS datasets at the Austin Automation center.

Annual data were generated from the National Enrollment Database between 2007 and 2009, and these files were prepared a few months after FY-end. These files are named:

- **MDPPRD.MDP.SAS.NED.MAIN.SEPyyGEO.PSSG**
("yy"=last two digits of year)

Since federal fiscal year 2010 (FY10), files have been created after the end of each quarter and after the end of the fiscal year. Note that the quarterly files lack drive time and distance estimates, but those are available on FY-end files. Data is generated from the new national enrollment system called the Enrollment System Redesign (ESR). These files are named:

- **MDPPRD.MDP.SAS.ESR.M.mmmyyGEO.PSSG**
(Where "mmm" represents the first three digits of the month (i.e. DEC, MAR, JUN or SEP) and "yy" is the last two digits of the FY in which the dataset was updated)

Upcoming HERC Cyber Seminars and Course

Cyber Seminars

HERC feature presentations on a variety of health economics and health services topics.

The seminars are held on the third Wednesday of each month.

Each hourly session begins at 11 a.m. Pacific or 2 p.m. Eastern time.

August 17, 2011 – David Redfearn, Ph.D.

Advanced Analytics Senior Consultant, WellPoint, Inc.

The Analysis of Variation in Cost of Care - An Episode Of Care Methodology

September 21, 2011 – Erika Martin, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Public Administration and Policy,

Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany-SUNY
Expanded HIV Screening in the United States: What Will It Cost and Who Will Pay? A Budget Impact Analysis

October 19, 2011 – Matthew L. Maciejewski, Ph.D.

Core Investigator, Center for Health Services Research in Primary Care at Durham VA

November 16, 2011 – Patsi Sinnott, P.T., Ph.D., M.P.H., & Andrea Shane, B.A.
Health Economist and Research Associate, HERC

"Conducting Cost-Effectiveness Analyses with VA Data" Course

On September 14, 2011, HERC will begin its course series on cost-effectiveness analyses with VA data. This course is primarily designed for VA researchers who wish to learn more about cost-effectiveness analyses. The lectures are held on Wednesdays and each hourly session begins at 11 a.m. Pacific or 2 p.m. Eastern time.

The schedule of upcoming cyber seminars and courses, and information on the archives, are available at <http://www.herc.research.va.gov>.

To register for these seminars and courses, visit http://www.hsrp.research.va.gov/_researchers/cyber_seminars/catalog-upcoming.cfm.

FY2010 HERC Average Cost Data Available

HERC has released its Average Cost Data for FY2010 VA care. They feature an estimated cost for every completed inpatient stay and for every outpatient encounter appearing in the FY2010 Medical SAS Inpatient and Outpatient Databases, respectively, also known as the Patient Treatment File (PTF) and Outpatient Care file (OPC).

FY10 HERC Person-Level Cost Dataset and Guidebook Update

The HERC Person-Level Cost Datasets contain annual costs for each person who used the VA Health Care System in a fiscal year. The datasets include HERC average costs at both the local and national levels. The national costs are detailed to five categories of inpatient care and four categories of outpatient visits. DSS outpatient pharmacy costs have been added to the datasets starting in fiscal year 1999. Fee Basis costs for Non-VA care have also been added to the datasets for fiscal years 2000 to 2008. The Person-Level Cost

Datasets are available for fiscal years 1998 through 2010 and are located at the VA Austin Automation Center. The companion guidebook was updated to reflect the FY2010 data and is available on the HERC intranet web site under Publications.

FY10 HERC Outpatient Average Cost Dataset for VA Care Guidebook Update

HERC has completed the FY2010 Outpatient Average Cost file. The file is located in the HERC data repository of the Austin IT Center, RMTPRD.HERC.SAS. The annual update to "HERC's Outpatient Average Cost Dataset for VA Care" guidebook is now available on the HERC intranet site. The guidebook includes detailed information on the rebuilt FY2005 HERC Outpatient Average Cost file. Changes to this file now allow for researchers to merge the HERC Outpatient Average Cost file with the Outpatient Events file using the ENCOUNTER_ID variable from FY2003 to present. The guidebook

also contains information on the inclusion of inpatient costs in the calculation of cost-to-charge ratios for some outpatient categories of care. These errors in categorization had minimal impact on the HERC cost estimates.

FY10 HERC Inpatient Average Cost Dataset and Guidebook Update

HERC has completed the FY2010 Inpatient Average Cost file. This file has been posted to the HERC data repository at Austin. The updated companion guidebook is available on the HERC Guidebooks web page at <http://www.herc.research.va.gov/publications/guidebooks.asp>.

FY10 Proc Contents for HERC Average Cost Data

Proc Contents for HERC Average Cost Data has been updated through FY2010 and is available on the HERC web site at <http://www.herc.research.va.gov/data/a.c.asp>.

HERC Cost Dataset and Guidebook Updates

HERC's FY2010 Station Level Cost Dataset and Guidebook Update

HERC staff recently updated the Station Level Dataset to include FY2010. Now the station level dataset extends from FY2000-FY2010. The updated Guidebook can be found on the HERC web site at <http://www.herc.research.va.gov/publications/guidebooks.asp>.

HERC's Medicare Wage Index Files FY2011 and Guidebook Update

HERC updated the Medicare Wage Index file for FY2000-FY2011. Instructions for using the Wage Index file can be found on the HERC website at <http://www.herc.research.va.gov/publications/guidebooks.asp>. This file includes Medicare wage index, which is a relative value unit for the cost of labor in each market. The file has the VA station (sta3n and sta6a), the station's zip code, FIPS county code, and core based statistical area (CBSA).

New PAID FAQ and HERC's PAID Guidebook Update

Researchers often consider requesting PAID (Personnel and Accounting Integrated Data System) data when they need to calculate labor costs and hours worked; however, the PAID data are highly confidential and can be difficult to obtain. An alternative to the PAID data are the ALB data which contain aggregate data on labor costs and hours worked. The main difference between the PAID data and the ALB data is that the PAID data are presented at the individual level and the ALB datasets contain Budget Object Code-level data for each ALB cost center. FAQ I12 describes when researchers should request PAID data and when only the ALB data are needed. Please visit http://www.herc.research.va.gov/resources/faq_i12.asp to read the FAQ.