



Kirksville Daily
Express
Kirksville, MO
Circ. 4500
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8/16/2010
19218



ST. LOUIS

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State purges hospital records

(AP) — Missouri's health department has purged several years of infection data from hospital records statewide, drawing complaints from consumer advocates that it frustrates efforts to assess each hospital's performance.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported Monday that state officials believe the material from 2005 through 2008 costs too much to maintain and is too sensitive for the public to examine for more than a year.

Consumer advocates counter that the removal of such data from the Department of Health and Senior Services makes it difficult to review the hospitals' infection-preventing performance and see how they fare against the national average.

"It sounds like they're violating the spirit if not the letter of the law," said Ken Bunting, the National Freedom of Information Coalition's executive director. "If it's being posted online, they don't need to take it down."

"In the age of the Internet, there's no excuse for that," said Lisa McGiffert, director of Consumers Union's national Safe Patient Project.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say infections linked

to health care kill nearly 100,000 people nationwide each year and cost the health system up to \$45 billion.

Missouri six years ago was among the first states to require hospitals to disclose their annual infection rates for certain surgeries and intensive-care units. At the time, that Missouri Nosocomial Infection Control Act of 2004 was lauded for its public-protecting potential.

"It's pretty sad to me that the (health) department can't give you a trend to show that a hospital is getting better or worse. It shows that the department doesn't really care," said Rep. Rob Schaaf, a St. Joseph Republican and physician who pushed the infection bill.

The state health department since 2006 has used an interactive website to present hospital infection data in numerical tables and graphics, with the oldest quarter of data purged as the latest quarter of data is added. So far, no data for 2010 have been posted.

The statute says the records must be retained for monitoring hospital performance but does not include language authorizing the health agency to delete hospital infection data.