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THE FIVE-STAR HOSPITAL?

For many patients, a visit to the hospital is beginning to look a lot like a stay in a luxury hotel.

So say a trio of researchers from USC and the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica. Writing this month in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, they explain why hospitals all over the country have been using amenities to lure patients. Facilities have a lot to gain by treating a high volume of patients, and if it takes resort-like services to attract them, so be it.

Case in point: The Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, which opened in 2008. In addition to offering private rooms, the hospital's "Better Way to Get Better" ad campaign highlighted the availability of room-service meals, massage therapists, stunning views and "a host of other unexpected amenities." It may seem silly — even tacky — but it succeeded in boosting the proportion of patients who said they would recommend UCLA from 71% to 85%, the researchers said.

For some patients, amenities are actually more important than quality of medical care. The researchers looked at data on Los Angeles-area Medicare patients who needed hospital treatment for pneumonia from 2000 to 2004. Many chose not to go to the hospital closest to them, but the ones they picked instead didn't always have the best medical outcomes. Something else, presumably including amenities, was the draw.

The researchers also cited a recent survey that found patients believe that a hospital's "nonclinical experience" matters twice as much as its "clinical reputation." How could this be? "Consumers may be making choices on the basis of amenities because they are easier to understand," they wrote.

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