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ER glut turns focus to customer service

STAFF, WIRE REPORTS • AUGUST 27, 2010

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Emergency rooms are getting busier, forcing hospitals to try innovative tactics to cut delays -- such as stationing doctors at the front door to get a jump-start on certain patients.

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Some are publishing wait times online, via text message and on flashing billboards in an attempt to defer non-emergency situations away from the ER and into urgent care centers.

And in 2012, hospitals are supposed to begin reporting to Medicare how fast their ERs move certain patients through, a first step at increasing quality of care across the board.

There are no statistics on how many hospitals advertise wait times, although they tend to have multiple ERs in a region, usually the suburbs. The idea: People with less urgent conditions -- maybe they need stitches for a cut -- might drive a bit farther for a shorter wait, possibly helping a hospital chain spread the load without losing easier cases to competitors.

Battle Creek Health System did that in December 2007 when it opened an urgent care center on the heavily traveled Beckley Road, about 6 miles south of the downtown hospital.

Officials had hoped that the 30 to 40 percent of patients who had been showing up in the hospital emergency room with minor pains and scrapes would use the Beckley Road Urgent Care facility for quicker service.

Ann Neeld, BCHS chief nursing officer, said Thursday that the urgent care center saw more than 12,000 patients in 2009, but that the main hospital emergency department has continued to see about 45,000 patients a year -- about 9,000



Neeld

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more patients annually than the department was built to handle.

BCHS has implemented several strategies in the past five years to reduce its door-to-doctor time from an average of 58 minutes in 2005 to 28 minutes in 2008 and 2009, she said. On average, the total time a patient who is not admitted to the hospital will spend in the emergency department is about two hours.


A major part of that decrease is due to the collaborative partnership BCBS has developed with the Family Health Center of Battle Creek, a state- and federally funded community health center.


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