

'One-Stop' Shopping Mentality Responsible For Long ER Waits

Officials: More Than 15 Million Californians Use ER Annually

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SAN JOSE, Calif. --

With California treating about 15 million emergency room patients a year, recent studies placed the state in the bottom 10 in wait times nationwide, with an average of four hours and 37 minutes on average per visit.

Officials said they now have a Herculean task in streamlining the system, particularly with more medical budget cuts slated for this summer.

Problems that plague the system are "long wait times, average wait times greater than eight hours, inefficiencies, chronic overcrowding patients that would leave without being seen due to long wait times," said Tina Bray of the Highland Hospital emergency room.

Critics said the a problem has been years in the making, with factors such as a growing aging population, healthcare cuts, and the closing of 70 state emergency rooms over the past decade.

"The patient population grew from the 90s into the 2000s, the population that was seeking care increased," Bray said. "That, coupled with the growing number of uninsured, stretched the system beyond its capacity and it broke."

Regional Vice President of the Hospital Council Scott Seamons said that he is concerned to what the future might hold.

"When the medical patient has a healthcare need they are going to come to the emergency room that is going to overcrowd the ER immediately," he said. "What we're concerned with is that emergency rooms will become the medical offices of first resort."

That in mind, emergency rooms such as Highland Hospital's have implemented a four-tiered system based on the severity of the sickness to determine who gets the care they need the most in the timeliest fashion.

Hospital officials said that since implementing this program, wait times have been reduced by more than an hour. Officials said that 33 percent of patients don't actually need a bed and 88 percent of patients are middle-class, insured patients looking for one-stop shopping.

According to Dr. Prentice Tom, chief medical officer of CEP America, the public sees the emergency room as a swift answer to a problem that could be solved otherwise. An emergency room visit that might average five hours at San Francisco General Hospital or three hours at San Jose's Good Samaritan Hospital can take care of all your healthcare needs in the emergency department -- including prescription refills, x-rays, cat scans and even dental needs.

"If you have a medical problem, a lot of times it can be worked out by your primary care physician," he said. "A lot of times, people want an answer right away so they don't want to wait three weeks for their MRI or their CAT scan. By the time you are done with all these studies as an outpatient, it's multiple weeks whereas [in the emergency room,] you can get that all done within a period of four or five hours."

Tom said that he hopes the public is cognizant of the nature of the issue at hand.

"What I am asking for is some patience once in awhile and some understanding that people are working as hard as they can with the resources that they have," he said.

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