

HEALTH

Average Emergency Room Wait Nears 1 Hour

Demand outpaces services available

(AP) -- The average time that hospital emergency rooms patients wait to see a doctor has grown from about 38 minutes to almost an hour over the past decade, according to new federal statistics.

The increase is due to supply and demand, said Dr. Stephen Pitts, the lead author of the report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There are more people arriving at the ERs. And there are fewer ERs," said Pitts, an associate professor of emergency medicine at Atlanta's Emory University.

Overall, about 119 million visits were made to U.S. emergency rooms in 2006, up from 90 million in 1996 -- a 32 percent increase.

Meanwhile, the number of

hospital emergency departments dropped to fewer than 4,600, from nearly 4,900, according to American Hospital Association statistics.

Another reason for crowding is patients who are admitted to the hospital end up waiting in the ER because of the limited number of hospital beds, Pitts added.

A shortage of surgical specialists also contributes. So, too, does the difficulty many patients have in getting appointment to doctor's offices -- which causes some to turn to emergency departments, experts said.

The amount of time a patient waited before seeing a physician in an ER has been rising steadily, from 38 minutes in 1997, to 47 minutes in 2004, to 56 minutes in



2006.

Pitts added that 56 minutes may be the average, but it's not typical: The average was skewed to nearly an hour because of some very long waits.

"Half of people had waiting times of 31 minutes or less," Pitts noted.

Researchers also found that there has not been any recent increases in the number of pa-

tients arriving by ambulance, or in the number of cases considered to be true emergencies.

Black patients visited emergency departments at twice the rate as whites in 2006. Among age

groups, the highest visitation rates were for infants and elderly people aged 75 and older.

About 40 percent of ER patients had private insurance, about 25 percent were covered by state programs for children and about 17 percent were covered by Medicare, the report found. About 17 percent were uninsured.

Some doctors said the report supports a call for increased governmental funding for hospital emergency services.

"Millions more people each year are seeking emergency care, but emergency departments are continuing to close, often because so much care goes uncompensated," Dr. Linda Lawrence, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians, said in a statement.

"This report is very troubling, because it shows that care is being delayed for everyone, including people in pain and with heart attacks," her statement added.

Dental Hygiene Student Helps Homeless

Took aim at reducing health disparities

Local dental hygiene student Betsy Preheim has received the Anthony Westwater Jong Memorial Community Dental Health Award for spearheading a dental health day for homeless men.

Preheim, who attends Clark College in Vancouver, organized community partners including local dentists and hygienists, the Free Clinic of Southwest Washington, the Clark County Public Health de-



Betsy Preheim

Their combined efforts produced more than \$20,000 worth of free dental services.

"Betsy's project demonstrated a true dedication to community service," said Melody Scheer, oral health coordinator at Clark County Public Health.

Scheer, who served as instructor for the Clark College class that organized the project, added, "Based on the outstanding response, she already has great ideas about how to make this event even more successful next year."

Preheim said she chose the project because of her belief in the importance of reducing health disparities for

underserved populations. "I'm happy that we could help these men, who had extremely limited access to dental care," said Preheim. "For some, the relief from oral pain finally allowed them to eat a meal comfortably. Others were happy at being able to smile without embarrassment."

Clark College President Robert K. Knight said, "We're so proud that Betsy has received this distinguished award. Betsy exemplifies the talent of our dental hygiene students and our college-wide commitment to service learning -- learning that makes a difference in our community."

Diabetes Increases Birth Defects

(AP) -- Diabetic women who get pregnant are three to four times more likely to have a child with birth defects than other women, according to new government research.

The study provides the most detailed information to date on types of birth defects that befall the infants of diabetic mothers, including heart defects, missing kidneys and spine deformities.

The study lists nearly 40

types of birth defects found to be significantly more common in the infants of diabetic mothers than in those who weren't diabetic or who were diagnosed with diabetes after they became pregnant.

Birth defects affect one in 33 babies born in the United States, and cause about one in five infant deaths. The cause of most birth defects isn't known but some risk factors include obesity, alcohol, smoking and infections.

Nursing Home Advocates Sought

Volunteer advocates and investigators are needed to serve as ombudsmen for residents of nursing homes, residential care facilities, assisted living facilities and adult foster care homes.

The Oregon Office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman will train the volunteers on the aging process, communication skills, problem-solving skills, investigation and other ombudsman skills. The certification training will begin on Friday, Sept. 12, in Portland.

Ombudsmen volunteers work to improve the quality of residents' lives, by identifying and investigating complaints and concerns on behalf of the residents, then working with the facilities to make changes. The typical concerns cover a broad range, and often include resident care; residents' rights, such as privacy, respect and dignity; and quality of life concerns such as appropriate activities and meals.

"The volunteers make a tremendous difference in the lives of the residents," says Kathy Walter, program administrator. "They are well prepared and effective."

Another training session for volunteers interested in serving as friendly visitors will be offered on Sept. 28.

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