Emergency Department Use in New York City: A Survey of Bronx Patients

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In the absence of universal coverage and an effective primary care delivery system for vulnerable populations, hospital emergency departments (EDs) are the ultimate safety net for many patients. This is especially true in New York City, where nearly 75 percent of ED visits in 1998 were for nonemergent care, or for emergent care that could have been treated in a doctor's office. Another 7 percent of visits required care in the ED, but were for potentially preventable conditions such as acute flare-ups of asthma or diabetes. New Yorkers who rely on EDs lack continuity in their health care and end up using costlier services.

Why do so many patients depend on hospital emergency departments for primary care? Do they seek emergency care immediately, or do they have time and opportunity to obtain care at a doctor's office or neighborhood clinic? Do these patients have a usual source of care other than the ED? Do they have any contact with the health care system prior to their ED visit? Does insurance status, race, ethnicity, national origin, or gender have an influence on ED use?

A Survey of Bronx Patients

To answer these questions, the Center for Health and Public Service Research at New York University conducted face-to-face interviews with 669 emergency department patients ages 18 to 55 at four hospitals in the Bronx. A large majority of surveyed patients were female and minority, and slightly more than half were either Puerto Rican or foreign-born. Two of five were uninsured. (See Figure 1 for a complete demographic breakdown of the survey sample.)

Why Did They Come to the Emergency Department? Only 14 percent of survey respondents said they came to the emergency department because they thought they had an emergent condition (Figure 2). One of three reported that his or her principal motivation was convenience or that the ED was the preferred source of care. One-quarter of patients cited pain as the main reason for their visit, while another 11 percent were worried about their health. Nearly 10
Only 14 percent of survey respondents said they came to the emergency department because they thought they had an emergent condition. More than one of three patients using the ED lacked a usual source of care (Figure 4). This rate was even higher among uninsured patients, more than half of whom did not have a regular doctor or a clinic where they regularly sought care. Blacks and immigrant patients were more likely to lack a usual source of care than Hispanics, whites, and those born in the United States. There was a gender disparity as well. Men were two and a half times as likely as women to go without a usual source of care.

What Happened Before They Visited the Emergency Department? Most of the patients surveyed had been sick or injured for some time prior to visiting the ED. In fact, nearly 60 percent had been ill for at least three days prior to the visit—16 percent for more than a week and 9 percent for more than a month (Figure 5). Generally, the length of the illness or condition did not differ significantly among population subgroups, although non-Medicaid insured patients tended to use the ED more often within...
the first 24 hours (27%) than either Medicaid beneficiaries (22%) or the uninsured (18%).

Despite patients' relatively lengthy episodes of illness, relatively few sought medical attention before visiting the ED. Only 21 percent reported any prior contact with a physician or other health care provider (Figure 6). Rates of physician contact were lowest among the uninsured (15%), men (14%), and foreign-born patients (13%); and highest among whites (30%), the privately insured (29%), and women (24%).

One of four patients also had no contact with relatives or friends about his or her condition before going to the ED. Men and patients born in Puerto Rico were the least likely to have consulted anyone about their condition.

Can Emergency Department Use Be Reduced?

New York City residents' high use of emergency departments for non-emergent conditions clearly indicates there is significant room for improvement in access to and delivery of primary care services. Findings from this survey show that most patients know their condition is not an emergency. It is the convenience and level of service offered by EDs that attracts patients. If alternatives to ED care existed that did not involve long waits for appointments, disrespectful service, and inconvenient hours, there is every reason to believe many of these patients could be persuaded to seek care elsewhere.

The survey also found that people have plenty of time to visit alternative...
... continued from page 3

sites of care. Patients do not rush to the ED at the first sign of illness—most wait at least several days. And most patients have not sought alternative sources of care. They come to the ED not when all else has failed, but as their first option.

Emergency departments are required by law to serve all patients seeking care, and they are likely to remain an important source of routine care for patients with few other places to turn. Improved primary care delivery, however, could help patients get better care in a timelier fashion, thereby reducing the number of preventable ED visits.

Improving Primary Care Although some health care providers have made progress in developing primary care systems that treat patients with respect and respond to their needs, more is needed to develop infrastructures, reengineer services, and train staff. Making primary care available at nights and on weekends, for example, could substantially reduce dependence on emergency departments. Increasing the availability of trained medical personnel for telephone consultation could also be effective in diverting many patients from EDs and toward primary care facilities. To ensure that primary care clinics are able to provide these services, financial incentives such as higher payment rates under Medicaid and other subsidies must be improved.

Greater coordination between emergency departments and primary care providers is also needed. Within hospitals and health systems, communication between the ED and the hospital's primary care outpatient department or satellite clinics is often weak. Coordination between hospital EDs and freestanding clinics and private practitioners whose patients use the ED is often nonexistent. Filling this information gap will require programs that identify repeat ED patients and notify physicians of emergency department use by their patients.

At the same time, the designers of such programs must recognize that...
one size does not fit all. This survey points out important differences among emergency room users. Some patients live in relative isolation with virtually no personal support system. Newly arriving immigrants experience a different set of challenges from patients whose families already have some experience with the health system. Stronger links between the health care delivery system and various community-based organizations will be critical in building trust and encouraging patients to use health care resources more effectively.

Notes


2 The four hospitals are: Bronx Lebanon Hospital Center, Jacobi Medical Center, Lincoln Medical Center, and Montefiore Medical Center.

3 Patients were selected systematically based on their insurance status as derived from charts of those waiting to be seen in the ED. Patients who had an overt mental illness, were too ill to participate, or did not speak English or Spanish were excluded.

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