

Province must make ERs work better

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You may have a shorter wait to see a doctor in an Ontario emergency room these days, but many of those departments are under an increasing amount of stress, according to a report released by the province's health care quality adviser.

Health Quality Ontario (HCO) recently released Under Pressure: Emergency Department Performance in Ontario. The report takes a broad view of the state of hospital ERs in the province and looks at performance measures such as patient satisfaction rates, ER visits and time spent at the hospital. However, its findings offer a warning to many ERs - a large-scale incident could cripple a department's ability to offer quality patient care.

"Many patients wait too long in crowded emergency departments to be seen by a doctor," states the report, which is available at hqontario.ca. "While progress has been made in overall performance, an (ER) could be strained beyond its capacity to provide quality to all its patients by a bad flu season, or if a hospital nearby has to temporarily close its emergency department. Long waits to see a doctor are not merely inconvenient... there can be serious negative consequences."

The risk of infectious disease outbreaks, medical errors and death increases the longer a patient waits for assessment, says the report.

Under Pressure shows that the maximum amount of time nine out of 10 patients spent in the department dropped from 8.7 to 7.8 hours between 2008-2009 and 2014-2015. The limit patients waited in emergency to see a doctor also dropped, from 3.6 to three hours.

However, the number of annual visits to provincial ERs increased 13.4 per cent, more than double the 6.2 increase in Ontario's overall population during that time. In total, there were nearly 5.9 million unscheduled Emergency visits in 2014-2015.

The increase in visits is blamed largely on Ontario's aging population - patients over 65 tend to require more frequent and complex care.

Many sick patients, who should be admitted to hospital or handed over to long-term care facilities, get stuck in ERs for extended periods of time because there is a lack of available beds in in-patient wards, Health Quality Ontario president and CEO Dr. Joshua Tepper said.

"Patients may spend hours and sometimes even days lying on stretchers in emergency examination rooms or hallways," he said. "Even with the demographic challenges the province is facing, the concerted efforts made by government, hospitals and others to improve the performance of Ontario's emergency departments have brought many positive changes. But it's clear that much work still needs to be done to make emergency departments work better for all patients."

However, the report also seems to direct some blame toward other areas of the healthcare system. 47 per cent of adult Ontarians reported visiting Emergency for a condition they thought could have been treated by their primary care provider, if that doctor or nurse practitioner was available.

All these extra visits put ERs "under a great deal of pressure", the report states.

Ontario has set targets for ER length of stays. The proportion of visits completed within the four-hour non-admitted low-acuity patients increased to 89.9 per cent, up from 84.6. Meanwhile, visits completed within the eight-hour target for high-acuity patients and admitted patients rose to 85.7 per cent from 79.8.

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care spokesperson David Jensen says the province is providing an additional \$140 million in funding to Ontario hospitals this year, to help further reduce wait times.

"We also continue to increase our investments in home and community care to ensure that patients can receive the care they need in their own homes, rather than in hospital," he said. So what is the province doing, specifically, to reduce wait times? The ministry has implemented a Pay-for-Results program that provides financial incentives to high-volume hospitals that reduce length of stay times. Nurse-led outreach teams are set up across the province to reduce transfers of long-term care residents to emergency departments.

Local hospitals exceeding expectations

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the doctors to focus on providing care, rather than searching for reports or scheduling their time. Also, the provincial Pay-for-Results program has played a prominent role in motivating the hospital to reduce wait times, she said.

Markham Stouffville Hospital is also exceeding expectations, with wait times of 2.1 hours in 2014-2015 and two in 2015-2016. Among other initiatives, MSH has an estimated ER wait time section for its Markham and Uxbridge facilities on msh.on.ca. The ER pages include: the number of patients at the hospital, a stopwatch image with a wait time indicator, and a graph showing the estimated busiest times for the department over the upcoming six hours. There's also a list of potential alternatives to the ER, like local clinics



Metroland file photo

Markham Stouffville Hospital is exceeding expectations, with wait times of 2.1 hours in 2014-2015 and two hours in 2015-2016.

and links for Telehealth Ontario and Health Care Connect, posted prominently on the right hand side of the pages.

Meanwhile, wait times are also declining at Richmond Hill's Mackenzie Health in each of the last three years. So far in the 2016-2017 fiscal year, wait time is 2.6 hours, compared to 3.2 the year before. The wait time was 3.4 hours in 2014-2015.

"On any given day, we see 250 to 320 patients at (the) Emergency department," Mackenzie spokes-

person Catalina Guran said, noting the hospital had 109,000 emergency and urgent care visits in 2015-2016.

Mackenzie offsets some ER visits by offering an Urgent Care Centre, 9401 Jane St. in Vaughan, for patients of all ages with non-life-threatening illnesses or injuries that do not require hospitalization or immediate surgery. The centre has on-site diagnostic and treatment services such as; x-rays, casts, stitches and laboratory tests.

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