

GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

Half of ER patients seen within 51 minutes, data show

BY ANDRÉ PICARD

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2005
UPDATED AT 4:38 PM EDT
PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTER

More than 14 million Canadians a year visit hospital emergency rooms. Tales of interminable waits for care are legion.

But, now, for the first time, the Canadian Institute for Health Information has published actual data on ER waiting times and, on the surface at least, the waits don't seem too bad.

The research, for 2003-2004, the latest available, shows that half of emergency room patients are treated by a doctor in less than one hour.

"The median wait time is 51 minutes," said Jennifer Zelmer, vice-president of research and analysis at CIHI, a non-profit organization.

One in 10 patients waited less than 10 minutes for medical care while another one in 10 languished for three hours or more before being seen by an emergency room physician.

"The urgent conditions seem to be seen quickly, while the wait is quite a bit longer for non-urgent cases," Ms. Zelmer said.

Douglas Sinclair, the chief of emergency medicine at IWK Health Centre in Halifax, said that is true. But he cautioned that, for that reason, the median waiting time can be deceiving.

"On the face of things, saying that most patients wait less than an hour sounds good," he said. "But for a lot of patients, that can be a really long time."

Dr. Sinclair said that level 1 and 2 patients -- those with traumatic injuries or severe illness - get seen very quickly. Level 4 and 5 patients - those with less urgent and non-urgent problems -- always fall to the bottom of the list, meaning there are great variations in the waiting times at the extremes.

"But the patients we really need to worry about are the level 3s, who make up 40 to 50 per cent of volume. These 'medium' patients are the elderly, diabetics, people with heart disease and other chronic conditions.

"We should really be seeing them within 30 minutes and we're not doing that," Dr. Sinclair said.

The CIHI information also shows that almost three in five people who show up in hospital ERs are there for "non-urgent" or "less urgent" medical care -- suggesting they might be more appropriately treated in clinics or doctors' offices.

"If we are to understand emergency department wait times in Canada, we must first understand

how emergency departments are used," Ms. Zelmer said. She said that while the figures suggest that ERs may not be the best place for patients to seek care, what is not clear is whether there are practical alternatives.

Dr. Sinclair agreed, saying that in his experience, "people tend to figure this stuff out. They tend to use emergency departments rationally."

For example, if a person has been hurt in a fall and is worried about a broken bone, in Nova Scotia [and other provinces where the only X-ray machines are in hospitals], it makes perfect sense for a patient to go directly to ER and not bother with a clinic or a doctor's visit. "Even though that's a non-urgent case, it saves time and money to go to ER," Dr. Sinclair noted.

According to an international survey published last year, Canadians are among the heaviest users of emergency departments in the world. Thirty-eight per cent reported having been to an emergency department in the previous two years, compared with 34 per cent of those surveyed in the United States and 30 per cent of those in Australia and the United Kingdom.

The CIHI figures show that waiting times in Canada are longest in the ERs of big teaching hospitals and shortest in rural hospitals.

The vast majority of patients who go to ER are discharged home. Only 11 per cent are admitted to hospital. So many people visit emergency rooms, however, that referrals from ER account for half of all hospital admissions.

The CIHI figures show that emergency rooms are busiest from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The least busy time is 6 a.m. Pediatric hospitals, on the other hand, report a surge in ER cases just before bedtime.

The figures on emergency room waiting times were collected principally at Ontario hospitals, although some from British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia were also included in the analysis.

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.