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ER Visits Keep Increasing, Survey Finds

Emergency Doctors Expect Trend To Continue

By RINKER BUCK, The Hartford Courant | April 27, 2011

One of the most frequently mentioned goals of health care reform is reducing expensive emergency room care, but a new survey of emergency room doctors indicates that this will be difficult to achieve.

More than 80 percent of Connecticut doctors responding to a new poll by the American College of Emergency Physicians said that emergency visits are increasing at their hospitals, and more than 95 percent expect increases next year.

These results closely track the national findings of the poll, which was conducted by the American College of Emergency Physicians in March. The group sent an email questionnaire to 20,687 emergency physicians across the country, and 1,768 replied.

"Despite health care reform, the survey concludes that visits to emergency rooms are going to increase across the country, and that having health insurance doesn't guarantee access to medical care," said Dr. Darria Long, emergency physician at Yale Department of Emergency Medicine in New Haven.

The ACEP cites federal statistics showing that emergency room usage reached an all-time high of 124 million visits in 2008. Among physicians who participated in the survey, 28 percent attributed the increase to the number of patients who lack health insurance coverage and thus are forced to rely on emergency room care. But this is not the only factor driving the increased traffic in emergency rooms.

"Emergency rooms across the country are seeing many more people now with insurance coverage — it's not a question alone of not having insurance," said Dr. Steven Wolf, chairman of emergency medicine at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford. "What you have now is an aging population who require a lot more emergency care because we are keeping people alive a lot longer and that frequently requires more emergency room visits."

Wolf said that aging patients with cardiac defibrillators, chronic pulmonary problems or diabetes, who might have already died just 10 years ago, now can lead productive lives. But their condition can be crisis-prone, especially if they encounter medical problems after business hours and their regular physicians are not available. These aging demographics, Wolf said, will drive increased numbers of emergency room visits regardless of health care reform.

Another factor, Wolf said, is a shortage of primary care physicians, which is broadly acknowledged in the health care industry. The pressure to see as many patients as possible every day to maximize insurance reimbursement has discouraged many medical students from entering primary care, he said.

"Many primary care family doctors are no longer taking new patients and, with the existing shortage of primary doctors, patients are virtually forced into the emergency room departments," Wolf said.

"And I don't see anything coming along right now that will change this situation," he said. "With a shortage of primary care doctors and an increasing gray population, you're just not going to see the number of emergency room visits going down anytime in the near or mid-term future."