

More Urgent Care Centers Coming to Arkansas

by **Mark Friedman**

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In June, Velocity Care of Shreveport opened an urgent care center in west Little Rock, making it the latest entry in a market niche that has been slow to develop in Arkansas but is rapidly expanding.

Urgent care clinics are touted as a lower-priced alternative to hospital emergency rooms for procedures that are not life-threatening.

Patients suffering heart attacks, strokes or other major trauma still should be rushed to the nearest ER. But for relatively minor injuries — a simple bone fracture or a cut that needs stitches — the cost of being treated at an urgent care facility is a fraction of what it would be at a hospital, said Alan Ayers, a board member of the Urgent Care Association of America.

Being treated for a urinary tract infection or strep throat might cost \$300 to \$600 at an emergency room; it could be handled at an urgent care center for \$95 to \$135, he said.

In the last few years, about 500 urgent care centers have opened annually, bringing the total to 9,000 in the United States, Ayers said.

More urgent care centers are expected to be opened when millions more Americans become insured under the Affordable Care Act, which requires individuals to have health insurance by Jan. 1 or face financial penalties.

Dr. John McLean of Shreveport, an owner of Velocity Care, said that if the Little Rock location is successful, he could see adding three or four more centers in central Arkansas in the near future. But he doesn't have a timetable for when the locations would be added.

Also in the market is Dr. Chad Sherwood of Searcy, who along with WellNow Urgent Care of Nashville, Tenn., is an owner of the Sherwood Urgent Center, which has six locations in Arkansas.

Sherwood said last week that he plans to add locations in the Cabot, Maumelle and Russellville areas by the end of the year.

“It’s definitely, I think, the future of acute care and primary care medicine,” Sherwood said. “There’s going to be a lot of them that pop up, but a lot of them are going to close their doors as quickly after they pop up too.”

It’s still unclear, though, what impact the urgent care centers have had on health care costs.

A study released July 11 showed it was difficult to tell if urgent care centers saved money by diverting patients from emergency rooms or increased costs by attracting patients from the offices of primary care physicians, where treatment can be even cheaper.

“While the general consensus of health plan executives was that it is unclear whether urgent care centers result in overall cost savings, they appeared optimistic about UCC’s potential as a cost-effective alternative to” emergency departments, according to the report by the Center for Studying Health System Change of Washington, D.C., a nonpartisan organization that conducts policy research and analysis of the health care system in the United States.

The study did find that urgent care centers filled a gap by providing health care services on evenings and weekends when the offices of primary care physicians are closed.

It’s unclear how many urgent care centers there are in Arkansas.

Paul Cunningham, executive vice president of the Arkansas Hospital Association, said he has not heard of many urgent care centers in the state. “Arkansas tends to be on the backside of a lot of national trends,” he said. “So if it’s happening in other states, I suspect it will happen to some degree in Arkansas.”

A Need for Urgent Care

In 2006, Sherwood opened Sherwood Urgent Care after seeing a need. Sherwood, who was an emergency room doctor, said he wanted to open a practice where patients could come without an appointment and receive medical attention quickly.

Since his first location opened, in Searcy, Sherwood Urgent Care has opened five more locations, including offices in Batesville and Conway.

McLean, Dr. John Soud, an osteopath who lives in Jacksonville, Fla., and Dr. Jerel Raney, who grew up in Little Rock and now lives in Shreveport, formed Velocity Care about three and a half years ago because they, too, saw a need for urgent care.

“We are all board-certified emergency room physicians,” McLean said. “We realized how busy it was in the emergency room ... and how difficult it was to get in.”

Some patients — with, for example, an ailment such as a kidney stone — would sit for hours in pain waiting to be seen by an ER doctor. “It dawned on us, ‘You know, we really can handle that away from an emergency room,’” McLean said.

McLean said the business model for Velocity is to staff the centers with doctors trained and certified in emergency care. The centers also have X-ray machines and labs to run basic tests.

“That way, anything that comes in the door we can take care of,” McLean said.

How It Works

Among the services offered by Velocity are treatments for back pain, cold and flu symptoms and minor cuts and burns.

Like other urgent care facilities, Velocity accepts insurance but charges a flat fee of \$115 to be seen by a doctor. Sherwood Urgent Care charges \$85 to be seen by a doctor.

And they require payment from all patients, said Ayers, of the Urgent Care Association. Urgent care centers aren't bound by the federal Emergency Medical

Treatment & Active Labor Act, which requires hospitals to provide care to people who need emergency health care.

For patients who can't pay, Ayers said, "the emergency rooms will continue to serve that population."

Sherwood said insurance companies have become more receptive to urgent care centers. The centers save insurance carriers money by keeping people out of the emergency room and potentially keeping people out of the hospital, he said.

Spreading the Word

McLean said he plans to get the word out about Velocity Care, which is located at 1160 Chenal Parkway, Suite 5, through billboards and by talking to physicians so they'll refer patients to urgent care.

"When the doctors realize that they're not competing with us ... they tend to begin to really like us," McLean said.

He said patients at Velocity are treated and then referred back to their primary care doctors if follow-up visits are necessary. "We're not taking their clients," McLean said.

Urgent care centers are growing because they provide convenient access to health care, said Alwyn Cassil, a spokeswoman for the Center for Studying Health System Change.

"Everybody talks about patient-centered care ... but sometimes it seems like the health care system is about everything but the patient," she said.

By providing after-hours access to health care to people who work or can't make it to their primary care physicians, the urgent care centers appear to have a niche, she said.

The centers are "growing rapidly because they're succeeding in what they're setting out to do, which is to attract patients," Cassil said.

