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Urgent care centers likely to see more traffic under Obamacare

By [Rick Ruggles](#) / World-Herald staff writer



RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Sharon Reck holds daughter Kali Barta as the feverish 3-year-old is examined by nurse practitioner Whitney Conley last month at Urgent Care of Omaha, 88th and Maple Streets. In back are Kali's great-grandmother Marleen Barta and sister Madison.

Urgent care centers are popping up in greater numbers here and nationwide, driven by demand for after-hours access to medical care.

The centers reflect a push toward better customer service in health care. A working parent who picks up a sick child at day care doesn't have to wait for an appointment. A weekend athlete who twists an ankle in a pickup basketball game can go to the neighborhood urgent care center for treatment.

Urgent care centers also fit with the push to reduce health care costs and insure more people. The centers provide an alternative to emergency room care, which generally costs patients twice as much or more. Millions more Americans will obtain health insurance because of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, and some of the newly insured can be expected to use that coverage to have colds, the flu and cuts treated at urgent care centers.

Family physicians generally say such clinics are acceptable as long as they handle fairly simple cases and don't try to provide ongoing care for chronic diseases such as diabetes.

A University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health report found 49 urgent care centers this year in Nebraska, up from 35 in 2008. Most are in the Omaha metro area and Lincoln. Nationwide, an Urgent Care Association of America board member said there are 9,000 urgent care centers, up from about 6,000 in 2005.

The Dallas-based board member, Alan Ayers, also estimated that urgent cares will see 170 million patients this year, up from about 76 million in 2005.

Angelia Porter of Omaha picked up her 8-month-old son, Jayden, from day care a few weeks ago and saw grayish drainage in his eyes. Late that afternoon she hustled him off to the Urgent Care of Omaha clinic at 88th and Maple Streets. The single mom, who works at a grocery store's deli, figured Jayden had pink eye.

"I couldn't get him in to his doctor, and I needed to know tonight," said Porter, 21.

Nurse practitioner Whitney Conley examined Jayden gently. "Hi. How are you?" she said. "Can you look at me? Hi."

She peered into his eyes, looked down his throat with a light, listened to his lungs and checked other vital signs. Yes, she said, it appeared Jayden had pink eye. She gave his mother a bottle of eyedrops she said should clear it up.

Urgent care centers provide extended hours and are open on weekends. Their practitioners typically include physicians, nurse practitioners and

physician assistants, and they are capable of treating colds, urinary tract infections, flu, sprains, cuts that need stitches, and broken bones that aren't severe or don't cause bones to puncture skin. Most urgent care centers have X-ray machines and small labs for blood and urine samples. Retail clinics, such as those in grocery stores, are more limited in scope and don't have X-ray machines.

Brad Felger, co-owner of the three Urgent Care of Omaha clinics and one urgent care center in Norfolk, Neb., called his clinics "the Starbucks of medicine." He wants his practitioners using a paper chart so they don't type into a computer with their backs turned to patients.

In a new Urgent Care of Omaha at 168th Street and West Center Road, Felger has placed small flat-screen TVs in the three exam rooms and one procedure room. The practitioner can turn the TV off with the flick of a switch on the wall.

Felger had a ribbon-cutting at the new clinic late last month. Five years ago, he told the group gathered, his company was on the verge of closing urgent care centers. Now he plans to expand in the metro area, aiming to add two clinics by fall 2014.

Felger said the turnaround started when he "fired all mean people" and placed the focus on customer service, creating "a culture of nice."

"And now we're growing and thriving," he said.

He said urgent care centers accommodate people who work long hours, odd hours or multiple jobs, and single parents who don't have a spouse to take a child to the doctor during conventional business hours. Felger said that "people have less time to see the doctor on the doctor's schedule."

The Affordable Care Act will make family physicians' practices busier, he said, which means more spillover to urgent care centers.

Felger's Urgent Care of Omaha faces tough competition, including from Alegent Creighton Health and Methodist Health System, which both have urgent care centers in the metro area.

"We think it's a very important offering for our patients," said Dr. Tony Hatcher, medical director for growth and strategy at Alegent Creighton Clinic. "It's a niche market, and you'll see people that get into it, and there will be an oversupply."

Alegent Creighton has three urgent care centers in the metro area and plans to place one in Council Bluffs in April, another somewhere in the metro area a year from now, and another in 2015.

"Actually, there's quite a few urgent cares already out there," Hatcher said. Nevertheless, he said he anticipates greater demand for them. "More people will be insured and will have greater access to health care."

Methodist Health System has three urgent care centers in the area, said Dr. Bridgett Wilson, director of one of Methodist's urgent care centers.

Wilson said a cash-paying patient who needs a simple level of service pays \$90 if he's an established patient and \$150 if he's new to the Methodist system. Urgent Care of Omaha charges a patient who pays cash \$125 at the time of the visit (if there are no X-rays or stitches and no extensive treatment) and Park Plaza Urgent Care, 105 N. 31st Ave., charges a similar patient \$80.

A Methodist spokeswoman said a cash-paying patient without insurance would pay \$230 for a minimal problem treated in the emergency room. The Nebraska Medical Center, which has no urgent care centers, would charge an uninsured cash-paying patient who needed minimal treatment at the ER about \$295 for hospital and doctor fees, said med center spokesman Taylor Wilson. "That probably illustrates why going to the ER with the flu isn't the best."

The California HealthCare Foundation reported that a 2005 study found that treatment of strep throat on average cost \$328 in emergency rooms and \$130 in urgent care.

Officials with three systems owning urgent care centers — Alegent Creighton, Methodist, and Mercy Medical Center-Des Moines — said their practitioners typically refer patients without primary care doctors to one within their own system.

Dr. Robert Wergin, a Milford, Neb., family practitioner, said resistance to urgent care centers is futile. "As a business model, they're here to stay," said Wergin, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

He stressed that people should have a primary care doctor who knows the patient and understands his medical history. If you go to urgent care, Wergin said, you get whoever happens to be working that day.

But people who have a cold, flu or slit their finger after hours or can't get in to see their doctor get adequate treatment at urgent care centers, he said. Urgent care providers should follow up with the patient's family doctor through a paper report or electronic record of the visit, he said. It's important,

for instance, that the family doctor knows what medications the patient received.

Further, patients shouldn't receive ongoing treatment in urgent care centers for diabetes, high blood pressure and other chronic conditions, Wergin said. Following those diseases requires a doctor who knows the patient's condition over time, he said.

Dr. Farid Sadr, who opened an urgent care center in Council Bluffs nine months ago and this fall is buying Park Plaza Urgent Care in Omaha, said he agrees that a patient should follow up with his primary care doctor. But not every patient has one.

Patients are largely responsible for seeing to it that their conditions are monitored, he said; and, ultimately, if a patient likes the care he received at an urgent care center and wants to return, that's fine, Sadr said.

A new medical plan offered by an Omaha business called Convenient Care Plus relies heavily on urgent care centers. The plan, called a "health care membership," offers employers and individuals unlimited visits to specified providers for a monthly fee of \$55 for individuals and \$85 for families. The plan uses 12 urgent care centers, up from four early this year, as well as Alegen Creighton Quick Care Clinics and some family practitioners.

Kevin Hensel, a Convenient Care Plus vice president, said the plan — which is not health insurance — covers more than 500 people now, up from 72 early this year.

Family practice clinics and doctors are well aware of the demand for convenience. The American Academy of Family Physicians surveyed members and found 45 percent of respondents had begun offering extended hours last year, up from 35 percent in 2009.

Boys Town Pediatrics has two clinics, called Same Day Pediatrics, where patients can call in and get an appointment that day. The two, at 88th Street and West Center Road and adjacent to the Boys Town Hospital near 139th and Pacific Streets, also offer evening hours. The latter is open Saturdays and Sundays.

Same Day Pediatrics began two years ago. "We understand people work and sometimes they can't come in during our daytime hours," said Dr. Jason Bruce, Same Day Pediatrics medical director. "It's very important to have access for them."

One Friday afternoon last month, Sharon Reck of Omaha picked up her 3-year-old daughter, Kali Barta, from day care. Kali didn't feel well and was warm. After her nap, Kali had chills, so Reck headed with her to the Urgent Care of Omaha clinic at 88th and Maple. Reck had used this urgent care once before.

Nurse practitioner Whitney Conley found that Kali had a fever. She gave her a small cup of medicine to reduce the fever.

"I don't wanna get a shot," Kali said, whimpering.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," Conley said. "Does your tummy hurt? No?"

Conley lowered the fever. Reck took her daughter to her primary care doctor early the next week. And soon, Kali was fine.

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