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Urgent care boom changing health system



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John Huff/Staff photographer

RN Diane Willey demonstrates some of the lab services provided on-site at Convenient MD in Dover, a walk-in health care facility that offers many medical services without an appointment.

By Casey Conley
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Posted Feb. 15, 2015 at 3:15 AM

DOVER — On a recent Friday, Melissa Steere's grandmother fell at home, leaving minor bumps and scrapes that her family didn't learn about until the next day.

By that time, her doctor's office had closed for the weekend. Rather than visit a hospital emergency room, they went to Wentworth-Douglass Express Care in Lee.

"We took her down there because (her injuries) didn't warrant sitting in an ER for an entire day," said Steere, 27, of Wakefield. "It wasn't life-threatening but her doctor certainly wasn't in the office on a Saturday afternoon."

Megan Hewitt of Somersworth made a similar choice when seeking relief for a sinus infection.

Without insurance or a primary care doctor, she wanted to be treated quickly without racking up a huge bill.

"All I needed was an antibiotic and did not wish to spend my morning in the ER getting several tests done for a simple infection," she said in an e-mail.

Walk-in health centers have existed in one form or another for decades, including in New Hampshire.

But the number of urgent care centers in New Hampshire is rising fast, fueled by several factors.

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There are 44 licensed urgent care centers operating across much of the Granite State, and almost one third of those have opened within the past 15 months, according to state records. These include new facilities in Dover, Rochester, Stratham and Portsmouth.

More are on the way. Tyler Brannen, with the N.H. Department of Insurance, said at least a dozen urgent care centers — most from a few large companies — are in the planning stages across the state.

Most urgent care centers are open later than a typical doctor's office and are open on weekends. They can treat many serious but non-life-threatening medical conditions. The cost of going to one of these centers is usually much less than an emergency room visit.

"Generally speaking, (urgent care) is a more cost effective way to get safe care that is a middle ground between the emergency room and the primary care doctor," said Dr. Lukas Kolm, who oversees Wentworth-Douglass Hospital's emergency room and its urgent care centers.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Ned Helms, director of the New Hampshire Institute for Health Policy and Practice at the University of New Hampshire, sees a couple of reasons for the urgent care boom.

One is the relative shortage of primary care doctors across the U.S. and parts of New Hampshire, which can make it hard for patients to get an appointment. Another stems from the federal Affordable Care Act, which offered health insurance to millions of people who lacked coverage.

"We're seeing an increase in demand for primary care services and an inadequate supply of people doing it, and the marketplace is responding," Helms said.

"A lot of places are now opening up, and they understand there are people with medical needs who have resources they didn't have before."

Cost is another factor.

While more people are now insured, many plans require consumers to pay a larger share of medical costs. The average health insurance deductible in New Hampshire is now \$3,000, according to Max Puyanic, co-CEO of urgent care provider ConvenientMD.

With some high-deductible plans, an ER visit for something minor, such as strep throat, could cost about \$1,000 under some health insurance plans, he said. A similar visit to most urgent care centers, meanwhile, would likely be billed like a typical visit to a doctor. Co-pays for such a visit usually range from \$10 to \$50, depending on the plan.

"Urgent care centers are providing a good solution for people that are looking for quality, convenient care at an affordable price," said Puyanic, whose company operates five centers in New Hampshire, including ones in Stratham and Dover.

Changing consumer preferences are also a factor.

Not everyone can leave work early to take a sick child to the doctor or seek treatment for a nagging cough. Most urgent care centers stay open late six or seven days a week. They also try to register, treat and release patients within an hour.

OUTSIDE MONEY

It's not a coincidence that a few large urgent care companies are expanding rapidly across the state. According to Alan Ayers, who sits on the Urgent Care Association of America board, many are backed by private equity groups hoping to cash in on growing demand for health care.

"The urgent care centers that have historically been in New Hampshire are really more (of a) hospital-affiliated model," said Ayers, who also is vice president of Concentra Urgent Care, a chain owned by the health insurer Humana. "What we are seeing is an increase in entrepreneurial activity around urgent care."

"Like any entrepreneur, these private operators look at factors like demographics, traffic count, population density and very much use retail decision making in determining where they place centers," he said.

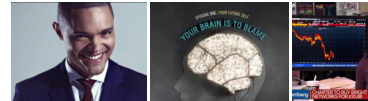
In other words, locations that make sense for a Starbucks or Panera Bread usually work for an urgent care center, too.

Urgent care centers are a low-margin business that need a lot of patients to cover rent, marketing, employee pay and supplies. But once that threshold is met, every patient that walks in the door contributes to the bottom line.

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With so much expansion and a fixed number of potential patients, some urgent care centers won't survive. As a result, customer service is just as important as quick service at the facilities.

"The truth is that all facilities will not be successful," Puyanik said. "Some facilities that open will not make it. We think ultimately the facilities that provide the highest quality care and the best experiences at the lowest cost will survive and others won't."

HIGH STANDARDS

Urgent care centers are not intended to replace primary care doctors for sickness prevention, general well-being or regular treatment of serious illnesses. But for "episodic" injuries that require treatment within a day or two, there is no evidence urgent care centers provide lower quality care than a doctor's office or emergency room.

"I have not seen anything that says if you hit your thumb with a hammer and want to get seen and taken care of ... that the care is going to suffer because of the nature of the organization you are walking into," said Helms of the UNH health policy center.

Steere was pleased with the care received during her family's recent visit to the Lee facility. The nurse patiently explained care instructions for her grandmother, who is nearly 90. Steere said she and her family left satisfied.

"We weren't just stuck in a room and someone came running in and running out," she said, adding that they were in and out in about 90 minutes.

Hewitt, who has used local urgent care centers several times, has had nothing but positive experiences. Her most recent visit in December, for a sinus infection, typified that.

She was seen within 10 minutes and treated by a doctor who confirmed the diagnosis and wrote her a prescription.

"I was in and out within a half-hour," she said, "and my bill only came to \$56."

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