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Health Care

Health care report 2015: Urgent alternative

Health care centers, retail clinics popping up all over midstate

By **Larry Portzline**, June 12, 2015 at 2:00 PM - Last modified: June 26, 2015 at 2:42 PM



In the procedure room at Spirit Urgent Care in Camp Hill, Derek Cline of Lewisberry gets sutures on his forehead from Dr. Daniel Megivern. Cline had an accident in gym class at school that morning. - (Photo / Stuart Leask)

Midstate hospitals are kind of wishing these days that health care consumers would learn the following: If you're in a car accident or having chest pain, it's a good idea to get to the emergency room. That one's pretty obvious.

But if you twist your ankle playing softball and you're not sure if it's broken, you're probably better off going to an urgent care center, at least initially.

Also, if you have the sniffles, the ER is probably the last place you want to go. So how about trying a retail clinic like that one you saw in the grocery store? Of course, there's always your primary care doctor, too. He or she is well versed in bumps and bruises and the flu.

But you knew that already, right?

You'd think so. But too many people are still walking (or limping) into ERs when they don't need to — and that's something Central Pennsylvania hospitals are trying to cure through the burgeoning urgent care market.

‘Growth industry’

Alan Ayers is vice president of corporate development for **Concentra Urgent Care**, which partners with the **PinnacleHealth System** on three locations in the Harrisburg area. He said urgent care centers are a “growth industry” around the midstate and across the country precisely because they “shift the lower acuity business — the less-serious cases — out of the emergency room.”

“ERs have the staff, equipment and training to handle anything from vehicle accidents to natural disasters” — resources that a banged-up weekend athlete simply doesn’t need, Ayers said.

The savings for hospitals as well as patients is substantial, he added.

“A treatment that might cost you \$125 at an urgent care center could cost \$600 at the ER,” Ayers said. So, much of the growth has been consumer driven.

“It’s a very service-oriented environment,” he noted. “Consumers like being able to walk into a facility without an appointment and see a doctor or nurse right away.”

Ayers points out that there are more than 9,000 urgent care centers in the U.S. today, and that the number is growing by 500 a year.

“Some of the larger markets have reached the point of saturation, but there’s still a real growth opportunity in places like Central Pennsylvania,” he said.

‘Fast medicine’

Dr. Johnson Coyle is the lead physician with **Spirit Urgent Care** in Camp Hill, one of two locations operated by **Holy Spirit Hospital**. His center sees more than 50 patients a day, most of whom don’t want to wait for a doctor’s appointment and don’t want to sit for several hours in a crowded ER, he explains.

“It partly derives from patients wanting what they want right now,” Coyle said. “We’ve become a fast-food society, so now we also want fast medicine.”

Insurance companies also like urgent care because it’s “cheaper than the ER, even though it’s a little more expensive than seeing your family doctor,” he said.

And while many centers are staffed by advanced-practice providers such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants, Coyle said, “It lends itself well to board-certified emergency physicians like me who are a little older and don’t want to work the night shift anymore.”

Overall, he said, the urgent care trend is “a major benefit to the health care system” and a pretty good investment for hospitals.

‘Retail’ medicine

Then there are the 24/7 retail clinics such as the FastCare facilities operated by Pinnacle Health in the Giant food stores in Enola and Camp Hill.

Amanda Bostdorf, a nurse practitioner, sees about 20 walk-in patients per day at the Enola location, handling minor needs such as sports physicals, scrapes, ear infections and immunizations.

“Even urgent care can be too critical or costly for some patients, so that’s why retail medicine was created,” Bostdorf said. “It’s affordable and quick. Plus it doesn’t get much more convenient than having a clinic in your grocery store.”

Pinnacle plans to open more FastCare and Concentra facilities in the near future — continuing the trend’s growth in the midstate, she said.

“The ER works best when it’s handling life-or-death situations, which is what it’s meant to do,” Bostdorf said. “If you go there for something else, you run the risk of being undertreated or overtreated. And it becomes very costly for everyone. So if we can get patients to go where they can most appropriately be treated, the system and the patient do much better.”

According to the website of the **Urgent Care Association of America**, it can cost a hospital \$800,000 or more to open a facility. As for the savings achieved by diverting patients away from the ER, the association says only that it depends on a wide variety of factors, including location, services offered, staffing, and whether the building is owned or rented, so a number is “impossible” to provide.



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