

CRAIN'S Health Pulse

Today's News Monday October 17, 2016

Weill Cornell Medical Center's new digital ER cuts wait times for patients with minor ailments

New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center is showing early success in using telemedicine to treat emergency-room patients with conditions that aren't severe.

The hospital's Express Care Service, which started seeing patients July 15, has treated about 300 people who come in for such concerns as coughs and runny noses, rashes, sunburn, insect bites, abrasions and contusions, medication refills and wound checks.

The average time from their arrival in the emergency department to discharge is 31 minutes. Patients with similar conditions in the ER typically wait two to three hours, said Dr. Rahul Sharma, NYP/Weill Cornell's emergency physician-in-chief. "This allows our ED physicians and nurses to focus on some of the more critical patients in the ER," he said.

With higher patient volume, hospitals are looking for ways to move patients through the ER more quickly, especially when they come in with minor ailments. New York-Presbyterian is the first New York hospital to offer the virtual ED visits.

In a May 2015 survey by the American College of Emergency Physicians, 75% of the 2,099 doctors surveyed said emergency visits had increased since the Affordable Care Act's individual mandate took effect on Jan. 1, 2014, requiring all Americans to either obtain health coverage or pay a penalty.

Patients who enter the emergency room at Weill Cornell are met by a triage nurse, who evaluates whether the person is a candidate for the Express Care program. The patient is then taken into a screening room, where a nurse practitioner or physician assistant takes their vital signs, gets a basic medical history and conducts a physical exam.

If a patient agrees to the virtual visit, the attending physician conducting telehealth visits is alerted and the patient is taken to a small room with two chairs, a small table and an Avizia telemedicine cart, which has a 24-inch high-definition display. The camera is capable of zooming in to give doctors a better view of wounds or cuts. Patients can end the visit at any time and wait for an in-person visit with a physician.

Following the patient exam, the physician reviews discharge and medication instructions with the patient, which are printed out in the exam room.

The visits are billed to insurers at the same rate as other emergency department visits. A spokeswoman could not provide information on the costs of starting the pilot and training staff to participate. The pilot has expanded to allow Weill Cornell physicians to see patients at NYP/Lower Manhattan Hospital's emergency department as well. The introduction of the program comes as many hospitals have devoted resources to keeping people out of the emergency department. Sharma said New York-Presbyterian also wants to connect patients to the right setting for care.

"Our goal is not to increase ED visits," he said. "Our goal is to give people more access to care. We recommend patients do go to their primary care doctor for minor complaints."—J.L.