



New website releases ER wait time figures

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Wait times.



The issue plagues hospitals throughout York Region and the Central LHIN and York Central Hospital is no different.

On Feb. 19, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care established a new website to track and monitor the wait times for emergency rooms across the province.

According to the website, York Central Hospital's wait times from July to September 2008 for patients being treated for minor conditions is already meeting the provincial wait time target of four hours until that patient is discharged or admitted to a hospital bed. That same figure puts the hospital ahead of most of their provincial counterparts.

But addressing wait times for emergency patients suffering serious and complex conditions is another task unto itself.

"Since April of 2008, York Central Hospital has experienced a 10 per cent increase in urgent emergency patient visits. That's a phenomenal increase in a short amount of time," said Dr. Larry Grossman, York Central Hospital CEO.

"Among these patients, the severity of conditions has also increased. The hospital has done a great job of caring for patients with more minor ailments and injuries, but continues to experience challenges with patients with more serious conditions, who require further investigation and monitoring and often need to be admitted to hospital.

"Overcrowding in the ER due to a lack of inpatient beds leads to delays in both assessment and transfers out of the department," Dr. Grossman added.

For patients suffering more severe conditions, their emergency room wait time before admission to a hospital bed or discharge is more than 15 hours at York Central; well short of the ministry's target of eight hours for such patients and behind the provincial average of 13.5 hours at other hospitals.

Though these numbers seem daunting, Dr. Grossman asks residents to keep these figures in perspective.

"I don't think you will find many hospitals that meet the ministry's target when it comes to dealing with ER patients suffering severe conditions. In our case it often has to do with a mal-distribution of these patients throughout the region and there have been times when we have had a completely blocked ER," Dr. Grossman stated.

Another factor that both he and York Central Hospital president and CEO Bruce Harber referenced was the number of Alternative Level of Care (ALC) patients who no longer require hospital care, but continue to occupy a bed while they wait for placement in other care settings such as long-term care, rehabilitation, complex continuing care and palliative care.

"On average 24 per cent of hospital beds in the Central LHIN are occupied by ALC patients awaiting placement in the community which ultimately reduces the number of beds available to patients awaiting admission in hospital emergency departments," Mr. Harber explained.

The hospital's old dialysis unit has been converted into an ALC unit with extra beds to accommodate these patients and make room for those waiting to be admitted.

"Today when I clocked in we had received another 35 admitted patients ... if we did not have this additional 15 bed unit it would be that much more difficult to cope," Dr. Grossman said last week.

"This has been an ongoing issue and when I started, a previous chief of staff told me that it was like the hospital fell asleep for 15 years and in that time York Central Hospital had not planned for the expanding population, the aging demographic and we are being forced to play catch-up," Dr. Grossman added.

Later this spring, construction will be completed on the remaining sections of York Central's new emergency department and further creative measures are being taken by the hospital to cope with the pressures of reducing wait times.

A lab assistant has been placed at the triage desk, who can take bloodwork and provide an electro-cardiograph at the same time, colour-coded treatment zones were introduced to help guide patients and families to appropriate areas of care, an urgent treatment area for pediatric patients was introduced plus a new ambulance off-load nurse was placed within the emergency department.

A new in-patient medical/surgical unit is also nearing completion and it is an addition Dr. Grossman hopes can alleviate some emergency room congestion. However, he says the key necessity to lessen wait times ultimately still comes down to funding.

"The question still remains, will we have the money for those new beds? Right now there is a huge difference between what we can afford to do and what we need to do to increase patients' access to timely emergency care," Dr. Grossman said.

"Until then, we will continue to advocate for the operating funding and expanded facilities that will enable us to reach our goals," he added.

For more information regarding hospital wait times visit www.health.gov.on.ca/transformation/length_of_stay