

## Urgent Care Center Sees Positive Results

Center relieves Ben Taub emergency center, connects patients with health centers

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A sprained ankle might not demand immediate attention in Ben Taub General Hospital's Emergency Center (EC), but it does in the hospital's Urgent Care Center, conveniently located within a few steps of the EC.

The center, designed for patients who don't require emergency care but still need to see a physician the same day, is improving patient care while relieving the EC for true emergencies.

Each month, the center sees between 800 and 900 patients. The demand has been so great that administration expanded the center's days of operation for the second time, adding Saturday (8 a.m.-4 p.m.). The pilot began April 3.

Last spring, staff increased operations from six to 10 hours a day on weekdays. The change reduced wait times, increased the number of patients scheduling follow-up appointments and eased congestion in the EC.

A random audit found 96 percent of the center's patients in January and February scheduled follow-up medical appointments at the Harris County Hospital District's community health centers. Last fall, only 60 percent of patients scheduled such care.

Patients who don't receive follow-up care are more likely to return to the EC, said Martha Stancil, Director of Ambulatory Care Services.

In December, 14 percent of patients visiting the Urgent Care Center returned to the EC within 48 hours, compared to no patient returns within 48 hours in February.

"This shows we are meeting patients' needs," Stancil said.

The expansion cost is unknown, but is believed to be minimal and would be offset by the reduction in return visits to the EC, Stancil said. In 2003, the center cost \$316,836 to operate.

"There's really no overhead cost because we're using existing emergency center space," said Stancil. "We staggered our nurses' shifts, and only had to hire one registered nurse and pay overtime for a clerk."

The staff comprises four physicians, three nurses, two physician assistants and a clerk.

Not all patients go to the EC for true emergencies, said Dr. William McKay, Medical Director of the Urgent Care Center and Assistant Professor at Baylor College of Medicine.

"We often see those patients who have toothaches, sprains or lower back pains," said Rose Guidry, Urgent Care Nurse Manager. "They should be seen in a health center, but for whatever reason come to the emergency center."