

At the Mall: New Clinics Let Patients Skip the ER

By LAURA LANDRO

After a heavy oxygen tank fell on her foot while she was visiting her mother in a nursing home earlier this month, Tamra Williams was in pain all night—but dreaded what she figured would be an hours-long wait in a Dallas hospital emergency room.

So the next morning she headed to a PrimaCare urgent-care clinic near a

THE INFORMED PATIENT shopping mall in suburban Mesquite, Texas, where a doctor treated her fractured toe and sent her on her way

within an hour.

Clinics like PrimaCare's—and others in many drugstores that offer fewer services—are increasingly cropping up nationwide to address a widening deficit in care: The number of patients seeking emergency care rose more than 43% between 1990 and 2009, while the number of hospital emergency departments declined 27% over the same period, says Renee Hsia, an emergency-medicine researcher at the University of California, San Francisco.

While the array of options can be confusing, for patients who do some research before an illness or accident, non-traditional care providers can help them cut costs and avoid excruciatingly long ER wait times.

Retail clinics in drugstores staffed by nurse practitioners can swab a throat for strep, while urgent care

New Clinics Can Let Patients Skip Long Waits at the ER

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nor acute illnesses, strains and fractures could take place at alternative sites, at a potential savings of \$4.4 billion a year.

With a worsening shortage of primary-care doctors, many clinics are increasingly offering medical services such as physicals and ongoing chronic-disease management.

Not all have succeeded. While the number of medical clinics inside stores, such as Walgreen Co.'s Take Care Clinic and CVS Caremark Corp.'s Minute Clinic, has nearly tripled over five years to 1,341, hundreds of others have closed because of low volumes, says Tom Charland, chief executive of research and consulting firm Merchant Medicine LLC.

That said, the model continues to draw interest: After stumbling in the market and closing clinics in many stores, retail giant Wal-Mart Stores Inc. earlier this month said it is seeking potential partners to expand again in the market.

Rather than open its own retail clinics, the eight-hospital Ochsner Health System in New Orleans recently struck an agreement with Walgreen, which operates Take Care Clinics in its drugstores across the country, including five in the New Orleans/North Shore community.

Nurses who field queries on Ochsner's 24-hour call service will steer patients to Take Care Clinics "as an option for minor issues where they don't need to see a physician," including off-hours, says Ochsner President Warner Thomas. Take Care Clinics inform patients about Ochsner's other services and provide patients copies of their visit records to share with other providers. Walgreen, which operates more than 350 clinics in 19 states, says it is pursuing similar arrangements with other health systems.

For patients, it is important to learn the scope of services at different clinics and hospital facilities in the area before an emergency and check health plans for co-payment policies.

example, if a patient needs further care.

And emergency physicians say that patients shouldn't avoid emergency rooms for convenience and cost alone. "If you feel you are having an emergency, the best place to be is an emergency department, where they are the most well-equipped and have the most able and well-trained staff to handle emergencies," says David Seaberg, dean of the University of Tennessee College of Medicine and president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Patients can ask if urgent-care facilities are certified by the Urgent Care Association of America. To be certified, centers must be open seven days a week, be staffed by a physician

at all times and have basic lab facilities and an X-ray on site, says Marc Salzberg, president of the group's board and an emergency physician who co-founded Stat Health Immediate Medical Care Clinics on New York's Long Island.

The group estimates there are as many as 9,000 urgent-care centers in the U.S., with 300 new centers being added each year, but not all offer the same extensive menu of services.

Many urgent-care centers also offer patients the option of calling ahead to get a slot in line. For example, Ms. Williams, 57, called the Mesquite PrimaCare clinic at 8:15 in the morning, setting up an appointment for 8:45. (By contrast, the average emergency

room wait time in 2010 was just over four hours, according to consulting firm Press Ganey Associates Inc.)

She arrived 10 minutes early and was taken to an X-ray room where her fracture was diagnosed, her toe was splinted and she was given a black boot to stabilize her foot and a prescription for a painkiller. Her co-payment for the service: \$50, half of what it would have been in the ER under her health plan, she says.

For patients, it can be advantageous to seek care at clinics and free-standing emergency rooms operated by larger health systems, which also own hospitals and employ doctors. Last year's health-care overhaul law provides incentives to better coordinate pa-

tient care, and health systems can keep better track of patients by between different types of care locations that they own.

Charlotte, N.C.-based Carolinas HealthCare System, for example, operates 32 hospital emergency departments, four freestanding ERs with five more planned, and 19 urgent-care centers. It is considering starting retail clinics in grocery or drugstores. "We can integrate care across a broad spectrum of settings and we have an electronic medical record that links all our patients no matter where they go," says president and chief operating officer Joseph Piemont.

Likewise, Salt Lake City-based Intermountain HealthCare, with full-service emer-

gency rooms in 21 hospitals, operates 24 urgent-care centers under its InstaCare brand, and can share patient records among all of them. Studies have shown that costs of care at retail clinics range from \$279 to \$460 less than emergency departments for similar cases. Urgent-care centers cost \$228 to \$414 less.

AtlantiCare Health Services in southeastern New Jersey, which runs two hospitals, has found its urgent-care clinics allow its several hundred staff doctors a break from working evenings and weekends.

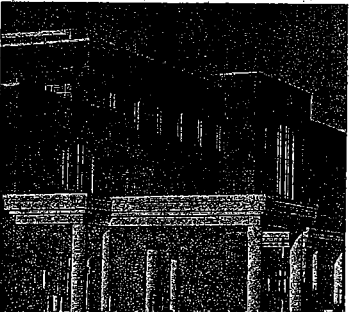
And for patients, the clinics provide a doctor's care "but don't clog up the ER where we are handling trauma," says chief operating officer Kevin McDonnell.



A Stat Health urgent-care clinic in Smithtown, N.Y.



A Take Care retail clinic in a Walgreens drugstore.



Emergency Options	From Drugstore to ER
Retail Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-hour care • Walk-in service • X-ray and lab services • On-site medical services • Walk-in and emergency services • 24-hour care
Urgent-Care Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-hour care • Walk-in service • X-ray and lab services • On-site medical services • Walk-in and emergency services • 24-hour care
Freestanding ER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-hour care • Walk-in service • X-ray and lab services • On-site medical services • Walk-in and emergency services • 24-hour care
Hospital Emergency Room/Trauma Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24-hour care • Walk-in service • X-ray and lab services • On-site medical services • Walk-in and emergency services • 24-hour care

Top left: Greenwood Graphics; Walgreens; AtlantaCare; Carolina HealthCare System