

# Hospital ER changes in the works

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**DANVILLE** - At the beginning of September, Art Doloresco, CEO of Danville Regional Medical Center, promised the community that improvements in the emergency department would be forthcoming.

Four weeks later, he announced that some headway has been made that already has affected wait times in the emergency room - one of the major complaints plaguing the hospital.

More change is to come, including the possibility of expanding the hours of the hospital's Children's Healthcare Center on South Main Street and its primary care facility, Family Healthcare Center on Piney Forest Road. Patients who come to the emergency room with primary care needs, such as minor injuries and illnesses, would be steered to these after-hours facilities.

Wait times at the emergency room already have decreased by 15 percent and the percentage of patients who leave the ER without being treated by 9.4 points (17 percent to 7.6 percent), at a time when the number of visits actually increased, according to the hospital.

"I am not by any means declaring the emergency department has been 'fixed,'" Doloresco said. "For what it's worth, this is a progress report to let the community know what progress we have made."

Doloresco cited several components to the progress.

## **New Protocols**

"The first is that Team Health has come in to organize the medical component and to put in place some policies and procedures to help us streamline the process."

Doloresco explained, "Team Health is an organization of physicians and nursing personnel who manage the professional component of hospital emergency departments. They are working in over 100 emergency departments in the U.S. and work with problems like ours. They show us what's going on in the rest of the country and teach us and guide us to do things differently."

Effective July 1, the emergency department physicians became employees of Team Health, and the hospital is currently recruiting for a medical director of the emergency department.

"The people from Team Health communicate via e-mail and phone," Doloresco said.

"They have spent about a week every month here to put together protocols and help us improve processes to streamline care and provide patients the care they need.

"For example, if you come in with a hurt ankle, you used to wait to see the doctor and have him order the X-ray," he said. "Now a nurse makes that decision, and the X-ray is available when you see the doctor."

Commenting on what a simple idea that is, Doloresco said, "Sometimes when you are rooted in routine, we become comfortable with it. That's why it's important for someone to come from the outside and share ideas with us. We have the chance to break the mold of old processes."

The hospital CEO said that the medical staff has cooperated fully in implementing new protocols, even when it has had an effect on their practice and relationship with the emergency department.

"For example, if a consultant is called, the response time has been defined," he said.

"They are working more closely with the emergency department, and this would not have worked if the medical staff hadn't worked with it."

The entire hospital staff also has worked together to speed up the time it takes to admit a person from the emergency room.

"The physicians have always wanted patients to be admitted faster, and we have had great cooperation in getting patients into beds faster," the hospital CEO said.

### **Helping Hands**

"Another factor has been the use of hospitalists, which are physicians who are employed by the hospital whose responsibility is to take care of patients in the hospital for their medical needs."

Doloresco explained that a hospitalist will communicate with the patient's doctor and admit the patient without the patient having to go through the emergency room to be admitted. The hospitalist also will follow the patient throughout the hospital stay.

"These doctors will be taking care of inpatients 24 hours a day," he said.

The hospital currently has two full-time hospitalists and two part-time.

"We are hiring two more and then maybe as many as four more, which will bring us up to eight," Doloresco said. "They have been here for a while but weren't as well organized. As soon as we hire more, we will bring in a director from the outside.

"It has been popular in the past with the physicians. They have been solidly behind strengthening the hospitalist program. It's just never happened, but now it's happened."

If physicians want to continue to care for their own patients, that is still an option, Doloresco said.

He predicts, however, that the percentage of participating physicians will increase as more hospitalists are added.

A plan to decrease the number of patients who seek primary care in the emergency room also is being considered.

### **ER is for Emergencies**

Approximately 30 percent of the annual visits to the emergency room are not emergencies, according to hospital statistics.

To alleviate that problem, Doloresco said the hospital is considering expanding the hours of the hospital's Children's Healthcare Center on South Main Street and its primary care facility, Family Healthcare Center on Piney Forest Road.

"We're exploring the possibilities of expanding the hours of existing facilities to longer evenings and weekend hours," he said. "We want to try to create a situation in which the public gets the care they need in a place they need it.

"We want to treat them in an environment where they don't have to spend an inordinate amount of time in the emergency room unless they have an emergency. And we want to take care of those who have an emergency immediately."

He said patients might be able to be seen in other facilities in 45 minutes to an hour, while freeing up the emergency room for life-threatening emergencies.

"When people come to the ER, we have an obligation under federal law to do a medical screening, but if it doesn't meet the definition of a medical emergency, we will tell them they can be seen quicker at one of the clinics," he said.

Doloresco plans on going into the community on speaking engagements to talk to people about the changes being made at the hospital. He also is meeting individually with the doctors in Danville.