

More Docs Turning to Clinics

With as many as 50,000 people in Essex county without a regular Family physician, walk-in clinics serve a very important role. They provide easy access to health care for many patients.

There has been a large increase in the number of walk-in clinics locally in recent years, due to the challenges faced by traditional Family Practices including unreasonable wait times for investigations, specialist referrals, and overburdening paperwork.. Many new physicians are opting for work in walk-in clinics at the same time as those with large Family practices have decided to work less.

Although some facilities provide walk-in and Family Practice under the same umbrella, this article is limited to the walk-in clinic only.

Clinics attempt to provide convenient, efficient medical care for many non-emergent problems. They try to fill a void by servicing the increasing number of unattached patients for certain medical needs.

Family Physicians are not as accessible as they once were. Clinics also provide services to patients who can't access their own Family doctor. They also relieve some of the stress of overcrowded emergency rooms.

For those patients that have a regular Family Physician, they should attempt to see him/her first for any new medical problem that arises. This promotes continuity of care and fosters physician-patient loyalty.

Most physicians that work in walk-in clinics see similar problems as do traditional Family practices, with more emphasis on newer problems. Patients range in age from newborns to seniors. Initial investigations can be undertaken for new problems, and sometimes referral to specialists can be made when appropriate.

Some of the most common problems encountered in a clinic include upper respiratory infections, other infections, allergies, rashes, strains/sprains, and workplace medical needs. Some clinics do simple lacerations (stitches) . These problems generally

do not require long term follow-up.

For example, a sleep-deprived parent may wish to get their child with a fever and earache assessed early in the morning at a clinic rather than waiting for an appointment with their Family doctor in a day or two. They may still wish to follow up with the Family doctor in a week.

Often a significant health problem that requires follow up is discovered initially at a clinic in a patient with no Family doctor eg. hypertension. In this case, depending on the circumstances, the patient can be started on treatment, and monitored for a short period of time. In the past, the individual clinic doctor could decide to follow the patient himself, or give practical advice on obtaining a Family Physician. In many cases, this is no longer possible because of the doctor shortage. This presents a real problem.

Work notes are frequently required by employers. Since these need to be obtained on the day of the absence, clinics are often used due to their easy accessibility.

Walk-in clinics generally do not provide comprehensive care, or preventative care (eg. routine cancer screening in the absence of symptoms, or cholesterol testing). These require a regular Family physician.

Clinics also do not take care of certain presenting problems that are best served at an emergency room. Examples include severe headache, chest pain, severe shortness of breath, lacerations (cuts) with heavy bleeding, nosebleeds, severe abdominal pain, and possible broken/dislocated bones.

Critics use these inherent limitations as a case for the indictment of all walk-in clinics. Additional arguments include everything from the quality of the care, to duplication of care resulting in needless extra costs to our system.

However, according to a recent study published in the Journal of the Canadian Medical Association, quality of care

scores were actually higher in walk-in clinics and emergency departments, than in Family Practices.

Clinics function best within a strong health care system that provides timely access to diagnostic services, specialist referral as well as a strong Family Practice network.

Although walk-in clinics remain an important component, the deteriorating health care system around it may limit the benefits that patients can expect in the future.

Dr. Paul Schwartz