

Paper article about the “Role of Urgent Cares” Paul Bradford

Canadians have many decisions to make these days in accessing care for themselves and their loved ones. It can often be confusing when faced with a new health problem or issue deciding where to access care. In Essex County, you have to wade through the choices of: an ambulance, the emergency department, an urgent care centre, an appointment with your family physician, or a walk-in clinic.

One would hope that common sense would guide us through the various steps in decision making. If we have a life and limb threatening emergency, we should call an ambulance, or go to an emergency department. As a full-time emergency physician, I have been amazed at the logical steps people have followed in accessing care. It’s quite shocking to note the impact of television shows, media, and “family experts” on peoples’ decisions during moments of crisis. An overstrained system with the possibility of long waits and a modern culture which craves instant gratification, have combined forces to confound even the most grounded and gifted minds

Unfortunately, denial, fear of parking fees, herbal medicine, and the internet are just a few reasons that have resulted in the frequent late access to care for life threatening conditions. The amalgamation of four emergency departments into two, as well as the expansion and growth of the City of Windsor, have served to put a strain on the Emergency Department. Lately, this has been improved somewhat by the construction of newer departments and the expansion of emergency physician and nursing coverage in Essex County. Unfortunately, due to obvious confidentiality reasons, the waiting room does not see, the resuscitation that is occurring or realize that there are usually over forty people in the department being cared for. After all, “ER” is only a one hour television show, and everything seems to wrap up before the last commercial. Perhaps the staff is doing too much kissing behind those curtains like on TV and “that’s why I’m not getting care here”.

Emergency physicians soon began to realize that life and limb threatening injuries and illnesses could often tie up the staff and department for hours at a time, resulting in people with serious illnesses and injuries walking out due to frustration with prolonged waiting times and a perceived feeling that they were never going to be seen. Out of that came the creation of “Fast Track” areas in the emergency departments to care for patients with less critical issues; and to give them timely care. This has made a huge impact on wait times and patient satisfaction but can still be subjected to long waits if a multi-vehicle collision comes in or many critically ill people.

It was soon recognized by emergency physicians that there was a need for timely access for less critical but serious illness and injuries, and that this care needed to be pushed out into other areas of the county. The Urgent Care Center was born.

Basically Urgent Care Centers focus on serious and urgent injuries and medical issues. Their role is NOT to take over the care of the family physician or emergency department; but to help decrease the wait for care for urgent medical issues. To this end, urgent care centres are usually staffed by full time emergency physicians or ER physicians who have given up their stressful hospital practice but haven’t quite retired.

In Windsor, Tecumseh Urgent Care and West Windsor Urgent Care are linked with the hospitals continuing care through Clinical Care Pathways. As an example, if you are diagnosed with a blood clot in your leg, you will be able to carry your documentation to

either the hospital or the Urgent Care Centre. Either place will be able to start your injections of anticoagulation and have your blood work checked; hopefully decreasing your waiting time. If you were injured in an accident and discharged from the ER, you may need forms filled out for insurance companies or employment and may be asked to follow up with the ER physician at a clinic rather than come back to the ER with your forms as the ER may be too crowded, depending on the time.

Urgent Care Centres are staffed with experienced Registered Nurses and often have supplemented medical equipment. Due to the more serious nature of the case load, the clinics tend to be supplied with ER equipment such as cardiac monitors; defibrillators; ECG machines; intubating equipment; oxygen; and an emergency supply of advanced care drugs to help stabilize a patient until an ambulance arrives.

The Urgent Care Centres also have access to real time X-ray and lab, as these tend to be required in the management of more urgent conditions. Urgent Care Centers can diagnose and stabilize most fractures and repair most lacerations. They may offer more advanced procedures depending on the physician's experience.

Being open and staffed with RN's on most holidays and having evening hours, they tend to be a convenient location for allergy shots, packing and dressing changes.

Unfortunately, some people come to the Urgent Care who should have called an ambulance. We see several heart attacks a month and usually they state; "I wanted to make sure I was having a heart attack before I went up to the hospital and waited". In fact, on average, the urgent care centres send about one ambulance per day to the hospital for various emergent conditions.

Urgent Care Centres are not the place to manage cholesterol, diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic conditions. These conditions require follow-up with the same physician for months and years with ongoing periodic health exams, and screening. It wouldn't be appropriate to see different physicians every time, as that could in no way replace the relationship and continuing care a family physician provides. In fact, many family physicians leave several daily appointment openings for more urgent issues that creep up with their patients, and this could be the best place to try first. Every Emergency physician would agree that the family physicians' role or management should never be undermined, as the continuity of care is absolutely integral to proper health care.

Needless to say, I would value my family physician's opinion in my ongoing care more than any clinic that I could pop in and out of. I hope our health care system will do more to support, and reward the total comprehensive care the family physician provides.

Where ever you decide to access care, you should bring along with you a list of all your medications, including dosages. Remember to include insulin, puffers, birth control pills, over the counter medications, and herbal medications. Remember your allergies, and special personal warnings (if you're a deep sea diver, truck driver, train driver, airline pilot, or bomb disposal person) so we can avoid medications that may not agree with your circumstances. Quit smoking, eat some salad, go for a walk three times a week, wear a helmet, wear a seat belt, don't speed, check your smoke detector, don't go downtown at night and common sense should hopefully get you through and guide you to the most appropriate choice for your care.