

Area children left waiting in ERs, report says

Only Waterloo-area wait times are longer

Laura Stone, The Ottawa Citizen

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Median wait times for children to see a doctor in emergency rooms were longer in Eastern Ontario than almost everywhere else in the province, says a new report.

Children in the Champlain region -- which includes Ottawa -- waited a little more than an hour to see a doctor and left the ER after about two hours, according to figures from the study by the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

Only children in the Waterloo Wellington region waited longer to see a doctor. Children in Central Toronto waited about the same median time to see a physician, but ended up spending almost three hours in the department.

By contrast, young patients in the region that includes Kingston, Brockville and Smiths Falls waited only about 35 minutes to see a doctor.

The report studied hospital visits and wait times for children under 17, based on data from 171 Ontario hospitals.

The fact that the Ottawa area has a lot of high-volume hospitals is one reason for the region's longer wait times, said Heather Dawson, CIHI's manager of health sciences research.

Another is the presence of a Pediatric Academic Health Sciences Centre -- the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. Those ERs generally see a higher volume of child patients, Ms. Dawson said.

"Those hospitals saw 15 per cent of the total emergency

department visits in the province," despite the fact there are only nine of them, she said.

Ms. Dawson couldn't say how many patients CHEO sees in comparison with the other pediatric centres, including those in Toronto, London, Hamilton and Kingston. The report says seven out of 10 children are transferred to CHEO from other hospitals.

"Hospitals are looking at emergency department overcrowding and patient flow as they're looking to improve their efficiency," Ms. Dawson said.

The numbers may seem grim, but overall, children spend less time than adults in Ontario's emergency rooms, according to the report. Half of child patients completed

their visit in under two hours, while adults spent 2 1/2 hours in the ER, and seniors stayed for 3 1/2 hours.

One in 10 children left the emergency room after 35 minutes and 90 per cent are discharged without being admitted for inpatient care.

However, almost a third of the 685,000 children who visited an emergency room made two or more visits a year. Children make up a quarter of all emergency room visits in Ontario -- about a million a year in 2005-06, with 128,402 of those visits occurring in the Champlain region.

Dr. Ken Farion, the associate medical director at CHEO, says the lack of alternative health care is to blame. "That's a large number of children seeking care for problems that frequently could be dealt with in the community," he said. "There continues to be a lack of access to care, whether that be a delay in being able to see their own primary care provider, or not actually having a primary care provider."

Although children may spend less time in emergency rooms than adults, the time spent waiting to see a physician was relatively the same, says Dr. Farion, who attributes this to the fact that children are more likely to visit emergency for less serious ailments. About 45 per cent of CHEO's 53,000-55,000 patients per year come to the hospital for less urgent or non-urgent problems, he said.

For some parents, the emergency room is the only option when a family doctor is not available, Dr. Farion said. It's "the only alternative when they're being told that, 'Well, I can give you an appointment in three weeks.' That doesn't help me today."

He adds that when a visit to the emergency room is necessary, sometimes all you can do is wait. "It's not totally predictable. There will be days that it's supposed to be the quietest day of the week, and yet it seems the busiest."

Chantal Villeneuve brought her two-and-a-half-year-old son, Marc-André, to CHEO several times last year to be treated for respiratory problems. She said she's always been happy with the service in CHEO's emergency room, but now she uses the Family Health Network, which is comprised of a group of physicians who work together to provide

"Now I realized my doctor can do that," she said about the network's walk-in service.

Dr. Farion said CHEO is always looking to improve its wait times with methods such as a new patient-tracking system, communication with other hospital departments, and by resolving staffing issues.

He said CHEO's emergency department staffs up to four doctors during the day and in the evenings, and goes down to one overnight.

"We continue to try and make those improvements, to try to ensure that patients are getting the quickest and best care that they can. There's nothing worse than waiting in the emergency department."