Why Do Patients with Non-life Threatening Conditions Bypass Their Local Health Centres? A Cross-sectional Survey at Accident and Emergency Departments in Trinidad

The Editor,

Sir,

We set out to ascertain which factors contribute to patients with non-life threatening conditions bypassing their local health centres and seeking care at an Accident and Emergency (A&E) facility and the proportion of patients at the A&E with non-life threatening conditions. The literature suggests that if ‘a person bypasses a facility, it is almost certainly indicative either of significant problems with the quality of care at the bypassed facility or of significantly better care at the alternative source of care chosen’ (1). Accident and Emergency care is expensive and the diversion of resources from those in critical need to those whose criteria do not fit that of an emergency decreases the efficiency of the A&E departments. It is therefore to the public’s as well as the health system’s benefit to address the problem of non-urgent patients over-crowding the emergency rooms (2). We created a de novo questionnaire with input from the international literature, A&E staff, physicians and other researchers which was pre-tested. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with patients who were defined as having a non life-threatening condition by the triage systems at four major A&E rooms in Trinidad. One thousand one hundred and twenty patients participated, a 92% response rate; 58.7% were females, 56.5% were aged 20–39 years, 35% had a secondary and 8% a tertiary education; 44.6% reported an income between $2000–4999 TT and 41.8% were married.

The main reasons reported for bypassing the local health centres were that more services were offered at the hospital of choice: 31.5% (95% CI: 30.1, 32.9), respondents were unaware of services offered at their local health centre: 17.7% (16.6, 18.8), health centre opening and closing hours were inconvenient: 14.3% (13.3, 15.3), lengthy duration of the waiting time at health centre: 9.1% (8.2, 10.0) and being previously referred from the health centre to the hospital for a similar condition 8.8% (8.0, 9.6). Of patients attending the Port-of-Spain Hospital Accident and Emergency Department, 70.7% (68.0, 73.4) were determined to be attending for non-life threatening conditions.

We conclude that widening the range of services available at health centres, extending opening hours and promoting public awareness of the services provided may increase health centre use and reduce crowding at A&E departments in Trinidad for non-life threatening conditions.

From: RG Maharaj1, S De Shong2, J Archer2, M Cassar2, S Harricharran2, S Jagroop2, A Khan2, N Khatri2, S Koshy2

1 Unit of Public Health and Primary Care, Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago and 2 Medical students at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

Correspondence: Dr RG Maharaj, Unit of Public Health and Primary Care, Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.
E-mail: rohan.maharaj@sta.uwi.edu

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