

by Scott_LaFee

The long-lived TV show "ER" lasts an hour. If trends continue, that will soon be the average wait for a real patient in a real emergency room, with some risk that the real patient may become "short-lived."

WAITING A LIFETIME - Harvard researchers report that waiting times in U.S. emergency rooms have increased 36 percent for all patients. CNS Photo. MEDTRONICA - The Surgeon general reports at profiles.nlm.nih.gov/NN are compiled by the National Library of Medicine and contain every public report produced by the surgeon general. CNS Photo. Researchers at Harvard Medical School and the Cambridge Health Alliance report in Health Affairs that waiting times in U.S. emergency rooms have increased 36 percent for all patients, to an average of 30 minutes. The sickest sometimes wait even longer. One-quarter of all heart attack patients waited 50 minutes or longer before seeing a doctor, according to researchers.

Dr. Andrew Wilper, one of the study's authors, blamed several factors: the closing nationwide of hundreds of emergency rooms, an increase in the number of Americans who use ERs for medical treatment, fewer hospital beds and a lack of specialists available to treat patients.

In the study, Wilper and colleagues reviewed data from 1997 through 2004, covering 92,173 adult ER visits. Of those visits, almost 18,000 were deemed by ER doctors to require immediate attention.

But that didn't mean they got it, most notably those who were heart attack patients. The average wait time for a heart attack patient increased from eight minutes in 1997 to 20 minutes in 2004, with some patients waiting much, much longer.

The study also found that blacks, Hispanics and women all waited longer on average than white males. Wilper said it's possible blacks and Hispanics tend to visit hospitals with longer wait times in general. As for women, Wilper said doctors still don't recognize heart attack symptoms in women as quickly as they do in men.

BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

Your spinal cord reaches full size - about 17 inches - when you are just 4 or 5 years old. ("Human Body Fact Finder" 1999)

GET ME THAT. STAT!

According to the World Health Organization, 40 percent of people worldwide - roughly 2.6 billion people - have no access to hygienic toilets, instead using latrines, outhouses, buckets or simply the outdoors.

NEVER SAY DIET

The world's speed-eating record for burritos is 11.81 pounds in 10 minutes, held by Timothy Janus.

MEDTRONICA

Surgeon general reports

profiles.nlm.nih.gov/NN

Compiled by the National Library of Medicine, this site purports to contain every public report produced by the surgeon general, including the famous 1964 report on smoking. It's hard to know whether every report is actually here - the site isn't the easiest to navigate - but there's plenty to peruse.

STORIES FOR THE WAITING ROOM

Last year, a 24-year-old Italian tourist appeared at an Australian hospital emergency room, having consumed a large quantity of ethylene glycol, a common ingredient in antifreeze that can cause renal failure.

Standard medical treatment often involves giving the patient pure 100 percent medicinal alcohol, which inhibits the effects of ethylene glycol. But the emergency room doctors quickly ran out of medicinal alcohol and switched to a more readily available alternative - a vodka drip.

The tourist recovered.

DOC TALK

Hasselhoff - A term used to describe any patient who offers a bizarre explanation to doctors for an injury. The name refers to TV actor David Hasselhoff ("Baywatch") who said he hit his head on a chandelier at a gym while shaving in 2006. The resulting shower of broken glass severed four tendons and an artery in his right arm.

PHOBIA OF THE WEEK

Automatonophobia - a fear of ventriloquist's dummies, animatronic creatures, wax statues and anything else that falsely represents a sentient being

OBSERVATION

"My doctor is nice. Every time I see him, I'm ashamed of what I think of doctors in general."

- Author Mignon McLaughlin ("The Second Neurotic's Notebook," 1966)

BEST MEDICINE

Patient: Doctor, I think I need glasses.

Teller: You're right. This is a bank.

LAST WORDS

"This is no time to make new enemies."

- French writer and philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) when asked to forswear Satan on his deathbed.

WellNews: Waiting a lifetime by Scott_LaFee