

Relevant Research

Tracking the Seasons of Hospital Use

Are you ready for next year's flu season? Or will you be caught again, unprepared for healthcare's annual crisis, with its attendant miseries – patients lying in hallways, surgery cancelled, TV cameras everywhere and hounded politicians on the line.

There is an alternative, according to a study released late last year by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and Evaluation. In "Seasonal Patterns of Winnipeg Hospital Use," lead author Verena Menec and her colleagues review the factors that lead to overcrowding during flu season and offer ideas for averting the problem.

The authors reviewed 10 years of records on admissions and people waiting for beds in Winnipeg. They found the problem to be fairly predictable: sometime between December and April, the number of non-surgical patients in the hospital rises over the hospital's maximum capacity and stays there from one to three weeks.

Noting that the patient-in-the-hallway problem predates the bed closures of the 1990s, so that simply adding more beds is clearly not a solution, the authors make several suggestions:

- Reduce the amount of surgery done in the peak flu periods, to keep beds available for medical patients when required. Do more surgery during the Christmas and summer holidays.
- Launch a campaign to increase vaccination for flu, particularly among the elderly; pneumococcal vaccination might be considered as well.
- Make it possible to discharge patients to nursing homes and homecare on weekends by having staff both in the hospital and in the community to do the transfers seven days a week.
- Assess patients who have been in hospital more than eight days rigorously; there is good evidence to show many of them don't need an acute-care bed.

Full copies of the report are available on the Web at www.umanitoba.ca/centres/mchpe/reports.htm or by calling the centre at (204) 789-3805.

Relevant Research is prepared by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. For more information please contact the Foundation at: communications@chsrf.ca.