



Hospitals concerned about people not seeking urgent care

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused havoc for hospitals nationwide, in terms of stress on hospital staff and decreasing patient volumes.

Emergency departments have seen patient visits slow to a trickle. At Olean General Hospital and Bradford Regional Medical Center, emergency room visits have slowed to about half of the normal volume.

The drop is causing medical concerns. William Mills, MD, chief medical officer, UAHS, said people are not seeking care for urgent conditions which could trigger a new set of patient health threats. It's an issue at hospitals around the country.

“We are not seeing people coming in with inflamed appendixes, infected gall bladders, bowel obstructions and, more ominously, chest pains and stroke symptoms,” Dr. Mills said. This raises concerns and begs the question, “Where are these patients and why are they putting themselves at risk by not seeking care?”

“We could be looking at a new wave of very sick patients soon who have delayed seeking care to a point where their health is at serious risk,” he said. Eventually deteriorating symptoms will force these patients to get care but well after they should have been seen.

“We understand,” Dr. Mills said. “There is apprehension about visiting a hospital emergency department because of fear of COVID-19. There shouldn't be. Both of our hospitals are very safe places. Over the past month, we have become COVID prevention experts. In fact, we have only had one health care worker become infected. We have adequate PPE for all of our staff, we provide masks for all of our inpatients and we provide masks for every patient who comes into our emergency departments,” Dr. Mills said. He noted that both OGH and BRMC are immaculately clean facilities.

“But delaying care for an urgent situation can change relatively routine care into a disaster,” Dr. Mills said. “A late presentation for something like appendicitis can be a life-threatening problem, causing riskier surgery and fighting a serious infection because the patient waited too long to come in for care.”

“In the case of heart attacks, patients with serious symptoms are not showing up in our emergency departments at the levels we are used to seeing for care and intervention. Ignoring symptoms and not seeking care could be a deadly decision.”

“Fortunately, both OGH and BRMC have not been impacted to date by COVID-19 like hospitals in other regions. The hospitals are safe and our staff is vigilant about protecting their patients. People should not fear going to our emergency department for care,” Dr. Mills said.

“You are very safe at our hospitals whether you are having a baby, need an emergency operation or need to be admitted due to a heart attack. If you have chest pain, it may be a heart attack not a pulled muscle; if your belly hurts it may be appendicitis, not bad pizza; if you cough, it may be your asthma, not COVID. Our emergency rooms and hospitals are not only safe, but are here to help you,” Dr. Mills said.