Extemporaneous Writing: Reducing Emergency Room Visits for Non-Emergency-Related Conditions

In the recent years, overutilization of emergency rooms across the United States has increased despite of efforts made to reduce emergency room visits. In 2016, the CDC National Center for Health Statistics reported that there were 145.6 million visits to emergency rooms, yet only about 8.7% of patients were admitted to the hospital. It is important to be able to control this issue to ensure that the quality of care and the standards of care are maintained in hospitals. As many Americans, I have visited an emergency room at least once in my life. As I’m sure many people would report along with myself, emergency rooms often have long waits and are often crowded with many patients waiting to be seen. For this reason, I believe that hospitals could begin taking some steps to reduce, and even eliminate, the overuse of their emergency rooms.

Emergency rooms are designated for any conditions that are life- or limb-threatening situations, however, many patients are not aware of this. An important first step to take for hospitals would be to educate patients. Although it may sound cliché, knowledge is power. If hospitals formed outreach teams and were able to reach out to the community through different education programs, then patients would be able to be more informed about healthcare, medical facilities, and their health. Outreach programs consisting of physicians, nurses and any other health care professionals would allow patients to be able to detect different signs and symptoms when they present a health condition which would, therefore, permit them to make an educated decision of whether or not they should visit the emergency room.
The knowledge presented by these outreach and education programs does not have to be limited to only health conditions. Currently, there is a gap of knowledge in which many patients are not aware of the different healthcare facilities they could visit. To bridge this gap, more awareness and information about the purpose of different facilities and instances in which it is better to visit a primary care physician or urgent care should be given to patients. This emphasis on proper care would not only lower the overutilization of emergency rooms, but it would also promote continuity of care between a patient and their primary care physician. Promoting this continuity of care would make sure that a better physician-patient relationship is established and would encourage patients to seek help from their primary care physicians when they encounter medical conditions that may not be life- or limb- threatening.

Another aspect of health care facilities that would be important for hospitals and outreach teams to discuss is the cost of emergency room visits versus doctor office and urgent care visits. From personal experience, I have been able to see the high costs that come with visiting an emergency room. These costs often add up very quickly and lead to higher insurance premiums which would directly affect patients and their access to healthcare. Building a strong foundation and pairing up with insurance experts to discuss the financial aspect of non-emergent visits to emergency rooms would also encourage a decrease in patients visiting emergency rooms. Some recent research presented by AthenaHealth and the Robert Woods Foundation showed that there has been an increase of only .3% of visits to primary care physicians despite the fact that Medicaid enacted a co-pay for patients being seen for non-emergent conditions. This
shows the need for better breakdowns of costs and expenses from insurance companies and hospitals to patients.

Overall, the steps that should be taken by hospitals to urge proper utilization of emergency rooms revolve around education and proper outreach to the community. Having a strong foundation of knowledge would cause a ripple effect in which patients would not only receive better and proper care, but also would be able to seek the best financial options to maintain the best access to affordable healthcare. As previously mentioned, knowledge is power.