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PCMH cuts emergency department waiting time

By Tom Marine

Wednesday, February 04, 2009

The Emergency Department at Pitt County Memorial Hospital cut wait times by nearly 14 minutes last year, responding to an increasing demand for its services.

The average wait time for patients, measured from the moment they walk into the emergency department until they are seen by a doctor, was 43.5 minutes during July to December, according to the hospital. That number is down from the final six months of 2007, when the wait time exceeded 57 minutes.

Dr. Timothy Reeder, the chief of staff at PCMH, attributed the improvement to an institution-wide initiative established nearly two years ago. The goal: Every patient coming into the emergency department will be seen in a treatment space within 60 minutes of arrival.

"Within an hour, we should be able to get you back into a room," said Reeder, who also works as an associate professor of emergency medicine at East Carolina University. "Now we're not so naive to know we don't do that all the time, but that's our goal. If you don't set high marks, you're never going to achieve it."

In November and December of last year, he said, 85 percent of emergency patients were taken back for treatment within one hour.

When compared to national averages, the PCMH numbers beat the mean wait time of 55.8 minutes in emergency rooms throughout the country, according to the National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey. The survey, released in August by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, measured 2006 data from a sample of 486 hospitals.

"It's very difficult to know how to compare yourself to other institutions, because everybody measures (wait times) differently," Reeder said. "It became a focus for us. We've made huge strides but we're not totally satisfied with where we are."

For the past 18 months, Reeder said these improvements have come at a time when patient volume and demand for emergency services continue to grow dramatically.

The emergency department has experienced a 17 percent jump in its patient count between the 2004-05 and 2007-08 fiscal years, according to the emergency room usage statistics. Also, the increase in patient volume is accelerating upward, a signal that EDs will be forced to accept larger patient loads in the coming years.

This national trend has been identified by many health care professionals, including Dr. Linda Lawrence, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

"More people each year are seeking emergency care, but emergency departments are continuing to close, often because so much care goes uncompensated, which is the real economic issue in emergency medicine today," Lawrence said about the CDC survey. "Emergency departments are providing a health care safety net for everyone. That's why any efforts to reform health care must include resources to strengthen the nation's emergency rooms."

Reeder noted how economic factors can have a direct impact on emergency departments. He said patients who don't have health insurance or enough money to pay for treatment are less likely to see their primary care physician and as a result need emergency services.

Access to health care also continues to create problems, Reeder said, as the primary care network
struggles with a lack of doctors.

"Even if you have insurance and money, there's just not physically enough doctors out there," he said. "That certainly plays a role in it."

Still, even as PCMH makes progress in its ED, there are several bottlenecks that may limit how efficient the department can ultimately be.

Reeder said there are not enough inpatient beds to cover the amount of ED patients being admitted into the hospital, which inhibits the staff's ability to move those patients.

That means some ED beds remain filled while these patients wait to be transferred to other units in the hospital, further clogging the process.

"Crowding in emergency departments is a national phenomenon," he said. "What causes it? It is the inability to get inpatient patients to the inpatient units, and that happens here."

Helping alleviate some of this burden, the opening of the East Carolina Heart Institute bed tower adds 160 inpatient beds, eventually bringing the hospital's bed count to 861. As Reeder says, freeing up this space will make the process more efficient.

With the population growth in eastern North Carolina, Reeder said the demands on the ED are only going to intensify and, barring any drastic health care reform at the federal level, will continue.

"It would take fundamental health system reform to change (this trend)," he said. "Emergency departments close every year, while the volume of patients continues to keep going up. So you are trying to care for more and more patients in emergency departments that just don't exist any more."
Symposium encourages healthier lifestyles

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, February 04, 2009

The fifth annual Jean Mills Health Symposium will encourage individuals to take control of their health Friday at the Hilton Greenville.

Hosted by the College of Allied Health Sciences at East Carolina University, the symposium will recognize health experts from ECU and across the state who use the health empowerment model. It will discuss the research and services that promote health responsibility and reduce existing health disparities.

There is a fee for registration, which begins at 8:30 a.m. — $25 for students and $40 for the general public.

Dr. Camara Jones, research director on social determinants of health and equity in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is the keynote speaker. She has conducted research on the impacts of racism on the nation's health, including how disparities arise within access to health care and the quality of care received.

The symposium, held in collaboration with the ECU Medical & Health Sciences Foundation, the Pitt Memorial Hospital Foundation and the Eastern Area Health Education Center, will kick off with Jones' presentation at 9 a.m.

"(The symposium's) purpose is to bring attention to critical health care issues facing minority populations and to seek solutions," according to the ECU Web site.

More than 300 people attended the event last year, along with 45 organizations, health care providers and other groups.

The health symposium is held in honor of Jean Elaine Mills, who died from breast cancer in 2000.

Mills received her master's degree from ECU in public administration with a concentration in community health.

Her brother, Amos T. Mills III, created the symposium in an effort to continue her community outreach.

Online registration and the symposium's schedule is available at www.eahec.ecu.edu

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WASHINGTON — Wells Fargo & Co. is likely on the hook for hefty cancellation fees after abruptly scrapping its upcoming retreats to Las Vegas casinos.

The company, which received $25 billion in taxpayer bailout money and recently announced a $2.3 billion loss for the last quarter of 2008, had booked 12 nights at two of the most expensive hotels in Las Vegas for events that included a luxurious four-day employee sales conference.

But after lawmakers and investigators admonished the company, Wells Fargo — which recently acquired Charlotte-based Wachovia Corp. — scrapped the trip Tuesday night.

The Jean Mills Health Symposium

What: An all-day event dedicated to health empowerment

When: Friday, 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
Where: The Hilton Greenville
Registration: Online or 8:30 a.m. Friday
$25 for students and $40 for the general public

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Editorial: Dental care - Access, cost are increasing problems in N.C.

Thursday, February 05, 2009

When East Carolina University first considered the establishment of a dental school in Greenville, it reflected growing concern about access to dental professionals in North Carolina. The state is well below the national average in the number of dentists serving its residents, and rural counties in particular suffer from a lack of adequate care.

The dental school will begin accepting students in 2011, but the problems threaten to be much worse by that time. That looming crisis should encourage the state to explore additional avenues for making dental care in North Carolina more accessible and affordable to all of the state’s residents.

East Carolina officials began exploring a dental school proposal in 2002, when many health officials expressed concern about a growing shortage of dentists. At the time, the state lagged behind the national average in the number of dentists per 10,000 residents, with North Carolina reporting about four dentists per capita to the United States average of six. At that time, however, the state was seeing a slight increase in the number of practicing dentists and alarm was somewhat muted.

That can no longer be the case. In 2007, North Carolina saw a 0.7 percent decline in the number of dentists per 10,000 residents, the first such drop recorded. More than half of the state’s counties have three or fewer dentists per 10,000 residents and four lack a practicing dental professional. Many of these counties are in the state’s rural corners, in places like Martin, Beaufort, Lenoir and Greene counties.

As it does so well, the University of North Carolina system moved to address a public problem through education. A partnership between UNC-Chapel Hill and East Carolina will soon see an expanded dental school at the state’s flagship university and a new dental school amid the system’s fastest growing school. In the coming years, that should help alleviate the shortage and improve dental care in rural communities.

Providing dentists in those places is only part of the problem, however. Rising costs leave many residents without preventative care, and choosing treatment options on the basis of cost. The state is also seeing more people with tooth problems going to emergency rooms because they could not afford regular care.

Lawmakers acted swiftly to fund East Carolina’s dental school, recognizing the scope of need in North Carolina. But the state can ill afford to delay further action to improve access to care or reduce costs until the first students complete the course of study. This is a tight budget year, but this issue demands consideration in this year’s legislative session.

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Pain management

Budget-cutting specifics lay bare the truth of how the national recession could affect North Carolina state services

Comment on this story

Governor Perdue has directed state agencies to pinpoint where they’d slice their budgets in response to the recession, and they’ve done it -- but the governor knows even more may be needed. Her initial call was to cut the current year’s operating budget, which is now $21.5 billion, by 7 percent, although she wisely indicated some protection for vital services such as education.

But as the specifics offered by agencies demonstrate, that doesn’t mean North Carolinians won’t feel the hit. Not to mention that cuts could go deeper. This week, Perdue warned that layoffs in state agencies may be necessary. After all, the projected budget shortfall for the fiscal year ending June 30 could top $2 billion, and that’s 10 percent of the operating number.

Some relief is hoped for through a federal stimulus package that could deliver billions of dollars to states. Governors have their fingers crossed, to be sure.

But so far as where things stand, it must be said that the governor’s staff will have to comb through the possible cuts closely, because while some might keep eyebrows level, others will have them dancing.

Consider, for example, that in the Department of Health and Human Services, there are suggestions to eliminate 50 beds at the Broughton and Cherry psychiatric hospitals, saving $6 million. But that would come at a time when the state’s mental health system is underserving people and is in a state of management flux, to put it mildly. Then, in that same department, there’s the $5.8 million that would be saved in closing Wright and Whitaker schools for emotionally disturbed children and adolescents -- again, a cause that advocates, rightly, will fight to preserve.

Even in the smaller proposed savings, there are dubious ideas. Counties and cities wouldn’t get $100,000 to help with sedimentation and erosion control. That’s a fairly small amount, but is it really smart to take a chance that creeks and rivers will "silt up" and thus risk water pollution problems down the road, creating greater cleanup expenses?

At the Department of Transportation, there would be less money for road repair and maintenance and a huge cut of $19.6 million in money for public transportation. And in the Department of Juvenile Justice, there would be an end to state-sponsored after-school programs, a savings of $5.9 million. Painful and counterproductive are words that come to mind.

It’s traditional, when agencies face budget-cutting mandates, for them to offer up for
sacrifice things they know will get the attention of lawmakers inclined to protect those programs. Lawmakers need to treat that game for what it is. It's also customary for some agencies to talk about passing on some responsibilities to local governments. The problem with that this time out, of course, is that the local folks don't have any money, either.

The governor is right to state frankly that this will be a tough process, and that not all virtuous programs will be preserved. As the balancing act continues, however, agency heads and the governor's office -- and shortly, the General Assembly -- need to hold fast to the principles of protecting working families, not allowing convenient shortsightedness to rule the day, and maintaining investments in public education, including community colleges and universities. And then let's pray for rain from Washington.

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A do-gooder, and proud of it

JIM JENKINS, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

By all lights, Dr. John Turner's long life was about making other lives better. What greater legacy could anyone leave?

Turner, the dean emeritus of the famed School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who died at 86 last Friday, was "solid to the core," as one former colleague described him, a fellow utterly committed to the idea that a university had a solemn duty to send students into the world to help those who needed it.

He did his part. And then some.

A Georgia native, Turner was the son of an English professor father and a mother who taught art and English. In that era (the 1920s and '30s), it was difficult for African-Americans to gain a college education, but the Turners did and instilled the value of good schooling in their son, who concentrated on math and physics at Morehouse College. He served in the illustrious Tuskegee Airmen in World War II, then finished his graduate work, winding up as dean of the School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Thereafter, he came to UNC-Chapel Hill as a Kenan Professor and then served 10 years as dean in the School of Social Work.

You can't really talk about the school without talking about Turner. He was its spiritual leader, and a person who made true believers of many who came to know that about the best thing a university could do, particularly a public university with a stated mission of service, was to train young scholars to tackle the toughest social problems on behalf of the people who needed their help the most and might not get help without them. The school puts it simply in defining itself: "We prepare social workers to make a difference."

It is not the most glamorous field of study, perhaps, certainly not the one guaranteed to bring the biggest financial reward upon completion, and unfortunately probably not one that gets anywhere near the public attention it deserves. But make a difference? Oh, yes.

Social workers go into communities and right to the business of confronting everything from drugs to health crises to child abuse. They teach others to do the same, and their search for the solutions to such problems requires a healthy dose of common sense. But they must have the training to know what they're doing and a scholar's eye on how such things could be done better.

And in a time when some universities have merged such schools with other departments, UNC-Chapel Hill remains strong with social work master's and doctorate programs.

The building that houses the school is named for Turner, for the late Jack Tate, a Charlotte businessman whose family took a keen interest in helping children and who beat the bushes for money and connections, and for the late Charles Kuralt, whose parents had been involved in social work and whose fame as a CBS correspondent helped spread the word. Along the
way, many others have signed on to help, among them Dean and Linnea Smith and a former protege of the coach, name of Michael Jordan.

But John Turner ... he was the one who put it together.

"John was the one who set the agenda," said Jack Richman, who succeeded Turner as dean. "What he said when he talked to me about coming here in 1983 was, 'You need to understand, we are going to change the school. We have a good school in a great university. We are going to have a great school in a great university.' He and Jack Tate started putting together a battle plan to educate people."

Today, Richman says applications to the school are up 20 percent, a good sign at a time when the economic crisis in the country can have an impact on increased problems with substance abuse and domestic violence, for example.

"Mental health and social services are going to be more important," Richman said. "The need is huge. Of the 100 counties in North Carolina, 25 have one or fewer trained social workers."

Chapel Hill's school is consistently in the top 10 in the United States, which has been the case for a long time now. It is an unassuming jewel in the crown. The same might be said of John B. Turner.

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Scholars seek to spread word on Sir Walter Raleigh

Sir Walter Raleigh was a swashbuckler, an adventurer and a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. He was the man who charmed her highness for permission to explore the New World. At least that's the Raleigh most North Carolinians know.

As it turns out, the little that's known about the man whose name is found from the state capital to the streets of Manteo - and as a principal character in "The Lost Colony" production - is mostly myth.

"Our perspective on Raleigh in North Carolina is really one-dimensional," said Robert Anthony, curator of the North Carolina collection at the Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "He was one of the leading poets of his day. He was part of the settlement of Northern Ireland. He wrote about military strategy, naval history. He talked about naval ships.

"He's so diverse. I think that's something we don't really appreciate here. People are just fascinated with him."

Anthony was one of the 24 scholars who holed up last month in the Tower of London, the dank quarters where Raleigh spent most of the last 15 years of his life working on Volume I of the "History of the World."

When the academics emerged from the Tower after two days, it was agreed that a critical analysis of the writings and works of the man largely responsible for persuading the queen to launch the 1584-87 Roanoke Voyages is long overdue. Although Raleigh was a renowned writer, akin to a bestselling author today, the last time his principal works have been published as a whole was in 1829.

With the 400th anniversary of the publication of the "History of the World" in 2014, the Raleigh Research Circle agreed to collaborate in efforts to bring together Raleigh's works, digitalized, critiqued and analyzed when possible.

Mark Nicholls, a St. John's College University of Cambridge professor and an organizer of the conference, also plans to publish a biography of Raleigh this fall. Larry Tise, a professor at Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences at East Carolina University in Greenville, was co-organizer of the gathering.

Although it is not known just how besotted Elizabeth was with the younger Raleigh, Anthony said the queen favored vigorous men who were leaders. Raleigh, in turn, did little to discourage her attention.

"Raleigh would write these very elaborate poems to her, comparing her to the most beautiful thing in the universe," he said.

It was Raleigh's secret marriage to one of the queen's maids that landed him in the Tower the first time. After a year, the queen released him. King James, however, was less merciful. Raleigh was beheaded in 1618.

"It was a very interesting period," Anthony said of those years of the English monarchy.
The North Carolina collection at UNC has about 1,500 titles on Raleigh, one of the largest printed collections in one place.

While imprisoned, Raleigh had access to a large library, said Frank Romer, professor of classics and chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at East Carolina University.

In writing his first volume of the "History of the World," Raleigh covered vast territory, from Genesis to Hannibal to Rome's Macedonian wars. According to an outline of the conference provided by Tise, Nicholas Popper, a CalTech scholar who spoke to the group, said Raleigh cited 500 published sources in the work, many of them written in the century before Raleigh embarked on his volume.

It was the first time anyone had attempted to write a world history in English, Popper said.

As significant as the book was, it was, after all, written while the author was held in the Tower.

"It was Raleigh's biggest work," Romer said. "It's really a political writing and his interpretation of history. In part, he was writing to show that he was a loyal and trustworthy person and had acceptable views and should be let out of the Tower of London."

Unfortunately, Raleigh was killed before he could get to his planned Volumes II and III.

Romer said the group saw the rooms where Raleigh wrote. "They were small and cold and a little bit noisy." Even though he was in prison, Raleigh was allowed to live there with his family, partly because he was not your ordinary prisoner.

Raleigh - also spelled Ralegh - could benefit greatly, the group agreed, with a modern eye cast beyond his mythical history.

"He played a significant role in Elizabethan life," Romer said. "I was very glad there was interest and support getting his lesser works into print."

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