

Surprise finding on ER crowding

Study says the uninsured aren't to blame

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Contrary to popular perception, the uninsured aren't to blame for emergency room overcrowding, according to a new study from the University of California-San Francisco.

"There's an extremely wide misunderstanding that it's the uninsured" flocking to emergency departments, said Dr. Linda Lawrence, a Fairfax physician and president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

From 1995 to 2005, the number of annual visits to ERs rose from 97 million to 115 million, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - a 20 percent increase. Yet between those years, the number of U.S. hospitals offering emergency care declined by 9 percent.

During roughly the same time frame, the number of visits to ERs by the uninsured actually declined from 15.5 percent to 14.5 percent, the study reported.

Meanwhile, from 1996 to 2004, the number of insured patients visiting an ER who also had a regular doctor increased from 22 percent to 29 percent.

The primary cause of emergency department overcrowding, the new study noted, is a lack of capacity to admit ER patients into the hospital. These patients can be "boarded" for hours and even days in emergency departments, occupying a bed while ill or injured patients idle in waiting rooms.