



Urgent care clinics carve out a key health care niche

By Matthew Staver for USA TODAY

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October 20, 2010

In a growing trend, consumers increasingly turning to walk-in clinics and urgent care centers for treatment of minor ailments and injuries instead of trying to squeeze in an appointment with a primary care provider or waiting at a crowded emergency room.

These shifting habits and the rising prominence of clinics and centers are reshaping the health care model that for decades sent patients to their primary care doctors, and if necessary, the emergency room.



Dr. Connie Price examines patient Gracie Sandoval inside the Adult Urgent Care Clinic in Denver Health Medical Center.

In fact, urgent care clinics are getting so popular that a handful of physicians groups and entrepreneurs are starting to franchise them a la McDonald's or Jiffy Lube.

Doctors Express, based in Towson, Md., bills itself as the "first-ever national urgent care franchise."

"We really want to change the way health care is delivered," said Peter Ross, chief executive officer of Doctors Express. "There is such a need out there. Once people start going, and get used to coming, to an urgent care center, unless they are having a life-threatening event, they're going to go there every time."

This has major ramifications on health care spending, as well.

A [RAND Corporation](#) study released last month in the journal *Health Affairs* said about 17% of all visits to hospital emergency departments across the United States could be treated at retail medical clinics or urgent care centers, potentially saving \$4.4 billion annually in health care costs.

Jason Shafrin, a Burlingame, Calif.-based economist specializing in health care, said the changes in health care delivery come as more and more people worry about time constraints and rising medical expenses.

"For patients, lower cost and more convenience play a larger role," he said.

Major growth

Medical professionals say urgent care centers started popping up in sizable numbers over the last decade, as health care costs began skyrocketing and physicians became increasingly frustrated as they fought for better Medicare reimbursements.

By 2007, the Urgent Care Association of America said there were about 8,100 urgent care centers in the United States. That has grown more than 7% since then to about 8,700 today.

"The reason they're growing is the same reason they exist in the first place," said Lou Ellen Horwitz, the association's executive director. "That's because of limited access to primary care physicians and obvious recognition there are obviously many cases in an emergency room that don't belong there."

Horwitz said patients often go to urgent care clinics for "that middle ground of issues that need to be seen immediately but aren't life-threatening emergencies."

With the March passage of comprehensive federal health care legislation, up to 35 million uninsured people will have coverage by 2019.

That could bode well for urgent care centers, Doctors Express' Ross said.

"We like the idea of having 34 million to 35 million people insured," Ross said. "That's a good thing."

Ross also thinks physician reimbursements will be beefed up as part of the reform, which should make urgent care a more lucrative business for franchisees.

Prices known

Urgent care center operators like to stress the differences between their facilities and the walk-in clinics like those found at [Walmart](#) and other retail settings. The latter typically are staffed with nurse practitioners or physician assistants, not doctors, and they tend to focus on treating minor illnesses such as upset stomachs, allergies or the flu.

The hours are generally shorter at the clinics and they don't perform X-rays or treat more severe injuries.

However, like urgent care centers, these businesses treat individuals who can't get an appointment with a primary care provide or might otherwise go to an emergency room for treatment.

At Walmart's clinics in Brevard, Fla., prices for different services are posted like a menu at McDonald's.

Treatment for acute bronchitis is \$59. An earache is \$49. A flu diagnosis is \$79.

According to Ross, the average cost to the patient and the insurance company for a hospital emergency room visit is about \$570. An urgent care visit ranges between \$125 to \$140. The waiting time can be less than an hour at an urgent care facility vs. three or more at an emergency room.

Filling a void

Nationally, many hospitals and physician groups are guarded in their comments about urgent care centers and walk-in clinics, though they do see urgent-care centers filling a void.

"To the extent that patients have access to places where they can have their immediate needs met outside a hospital, that can be a positive," Caroline Steinberg, vice president for trends analysis for the [American Hospital Association](#), told USA TODAY.

But medical professionals also caution that the public needs to understand when an urgent-care center won't suffice. A person suffering chest pain, symptoms of a stroke, or any kind of life-threatening trauma needs to head to an emergency room.

Shafrin said there are pros and cons to urgent care centers. While convenient and cheaper, urgent care centers have the ability to turn away patients forcing them to go the emergency room.

There's also a lack of knowledge about a patient's medical history, he said.

"One physician may not know what procedures or drug another physician prescribed in a different setting," Shafrin said.

However, for her 8-year-old daughter Madison, Liz Punched of Viera, Fla., found MedFast the best option on a recent morning.

Madison had been suffering from a sore throat and fever for about five days and it was tough getting into her regular pediatrician. And Punched had to take time off from work.

Madison's visit with a MedFast doctor and subsequent diagnosis took less than 10 minutes.

"Mommy has to get back to work," Punched said.