# Emergency Care System on Verge of Collapse?

## *An Institute of Medicine panel thinks so, and wants Congress to create a lead agency to resuscitate it.*

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WASHINGTON — Strained by rising demand and insufficient resources, the nation's emergency care is in a precarious state, an Institute of Medicine expert panel has concluded, and Congress must act to shore up the system.

Emergency departments are closing, the pool of available on-call specialists is drying up, and access to timely care in an appropriate setting is on the decline, warned Dr. A. Brent Eastman, chief medical officer of Scripps Health in San Diego, at the public release of the report compiled by the IOM's Committee on the Future of Emergency Care in the U.S. Health System.

The emergency care system's troubles are an especially frightening reality considering that it has traditionally provided the care of last resort, catching those unfortunate patients who have slipped through the gaps of the health care safety net, Dr. Eastman added. There is no longer any guarantee that it will be there when those patients need it, he cautioned at the meeting on emergency care sponsored by the Institute of Medicine.

The IOM panel recommended that Congress establish a single lead agency to oversee and manage emergency care, pulling together resources that are now currently overseen by an array of departments within various agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Transportation.

As the committee envisioned it, that new lead agency would have planning and budgetary authority over the majority of emergency care activities at the federal level. Such an agency could raise the visibility of emergency medicine and emphasize the need to fund it. The agency would also coordinate how those federal dollars are spent.

Among other recommendations, the panel urged Congress to fund a demonstration program, to the tune of $88 million a year for 5 years, to assess strategies to coordinate and streamline the emergency care system. Federal agencies also need to support the development of national standards for measuring performance, the IOM said.

The report documents a host of issues besetting the emergency care system, including crowding, boarding, and diversions.

"The signs of distress are unmistakable," said Dr. Arthur Kellermann, an IOM committee member and professor of emergency medicine at Emory University in Atlanta.

Over the past decade, visits to the emergency department—now up to about 114 million a year—have risen twice as fast as population growth. During the same period, the number of EDs shrank by 425, and the number of inpatient hospital beds fell by nearly 200,000.

"Do the math—with more people needing care and few resources available to provide that care, crowding in the ED was inevitable," Dr. Kellermann said.

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And with fewer hospital beds available, more severely ill and injured patients are boarded in the emergency department's exam rooms or even hallways until an inpatient bed can be made available.

"Some of them wait for hours, others wait for days. Meanwhile, other emergency patients are arriving every hour," he said.

Often, EDs have no alternative but to divert inbound ambulances to other facilities. "When I started in my career, this was considered a rare and disturbing event," Dr. Kellermann said. "It now happens more than half a million times a year in the United States."

### Demand Outpaces Resources

Emergency department responsibilities have grown over the years, with many now being expected to provide primary care to the uninsured, diagnostic services at night or on the weekend, and behavioral health care to the community.

Meanwhile, revenue has not kept pace. Medicare and Medicaid pay below cost for many emergency services, and uncompensated care has risen.

The emergency department is considered such an important public good that it is the only medical service that all Americans have a legal right to access. But hospitals are expected to finance that care through the free market system, Carmela Coyle, senior vice president for policy at the American Hospital Association, said during a briefing the day before release of the IOM report.

And because of low, and sometimes no, reimbursement, hospitals are finding it increasingly difficult to convince specialists to agree to be on call to the emergency department.

Liability, especially in a setting where many uninsured patients are in poor health, is also a major concern for specialists, according to an AHA survey.

"It's tough to get called at two or three o'clock in the morning to come in for a case where you know you might not get paid and you might get sued," Ms. Coyle said.

Some hospitals have begun to pay specialists a retainer to be on-call, but that is just another financial burden making emergency departments a money-losing proposition, she said.

### Stress on the System

Such financial difficulties have led to the closing of scores of emergency departments, which places more pressure on the remaining facilities.

Hospitals aren't inclined to give up inpatient beds to admit patients from the emergency department, who may pay at Medicaid rates or not at all, Dr. Kellermann said.

"Right now, all the incentives are to leave the patient in the ED so that they can keep admitting electives. You are financially penalized for making the right decision for patient care, because it is the wrong decision for your business," he said.

The IOM committee also concluded that the emergency care system is not equipped to cope with a large-scale emergency.

"You've got to ask yourself, 'If our emergency departments are struggling to handle their daily and nightly load of 911 calls, how in the world are they going to handle a mass casualty event following a terrorist strike, an outbreak of infectious disease, or a natural disaster?" Dr. Kellermann said.

Federal funding for emergency preparedness has been and remains inadequate, the committee found. In 2002 and 2003, emergency care providers received 4% of $3.38 billion in first-responder funding distributed by the Department of Homeland Security—although emergency medical services personnel make up one-third of first responders. That has left EMS providers with scant training or planning to deal with a disaster situation.

### Time to Act

The committee's findings show that emergency departments cannot continue to operate without more financial support, said Dr. Rick Blum, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

"Hospitals must be reimbursed for the significant amounts of uncompensated emergency and trauma care they provide," he said in a statement.

Dr. Blum called for Congress to hold hearings on the state of emergency medicine and to pass the Access to Emergency Medical Services Act, introduced in the House last September and in the Senate in May 2006.

The legislation targets several problems addressed in the report, including boarding, the lack of on-call specialists, and poor reimbursement for emergency care services.

Although emergency care on the whole is deeply troubled, the IOM committee found that there are islands of excellence—a select few facilities that have developed innovative approaches to dealing with the problems that all emergency departments face. Those islands provide a starting point on which to build a better system, committee members said.

"Our goal should be for these islands to coalesce and eventually blanket the United States with an emergency care system that has no holes," Dr. Eastman said.

The panel envisioned a new regionalized system to coordinate care, so that patients are only taken to facilities that are appropriate and prepared to care for them, he said.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish," Dr. Kellermann said. "Our committee has described a vision for a coordinated, regionalized, and accountable emergency care system. It's time to act." ■

## Secondary Report Cites Gaps in EMS

Problems with the state of hospital-based emergency care received the most focus in the release of the Institute of Medicine reports, but an accompanying report shows that systemic issues with emergency medical services also have an impact on Americans' access to appropriate emergency care.

Ambulance and other emergency medical services suffer from a level of fragmentation that has led to critical problems in efficiency, efficacy, and coordination, according to the committee's report on emergency medical services.

The system is severely lacking in data to drive, or even gauge, performance. What few data do exist point to wide variations between communities, said committee member Shirley Gamble, chief operating officer for United Way Capital Area of Austin, Tex.

"There is as much as a 10-fold difference by community in survival rates for sudden cardiac arrest," she said. "In one community, your chance for survival could be 5%, and in another community, your chances could be 50%."

The committee also found that the patchwork nature of emergency medical services creates barriers to communication among emergency medical service providers and between those providers and emergency departments.

The panel recommended that the federal government support efforts to gather an evidence base to help improve the performance of emergency medical services. They also advised that all paramedic training programs be accredited to ensure consistent quality across services.

Further, the IOM committee recommended that emergency preparedness efforts should focus on updating the infrastructure of the emergency medical system.

"Money needs to be advanced to provide training for EMS providers at every hospital and to provide equipment and communications systems," said Gamble. "Many of the communications systems in our communities were put in place in the 1970s, over 35 years ago."