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EDITORIAL

Joining forces to improve health

It is refreshing to learn that Uvalde Memorial Hospital and Community Health Development Inc. are cooperating in an effort to improve the efficacy of health care for our citizens. Specifically, UMH is altering its emergency room guidelines so that nonemergency patients will be seen within 24 hours by doctors at CHDI. The essence of emergency care is to perform triage, which is defined as: “the sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients, according to a system of priorities designed to maximize the number of survivors.” If that sounds like a battlefield or disaster scenario, that’s because it is. Triage evolved from situations where the patients who would benefit most got the most attention. With that in mind, UMH will rank patients on a scale of one to five (with five being life threatening). Patients deemed a “level one” will be asked to go to CHDI, Urgent Care or a primary health-care provider. Patients who decline to follow the procedure and insist on the ER visit will be charged \$125 as a down payment toward the cost of care. Patients who are unable to pay, but still insist on being treated in the ER will be required to sign a promissory note to pay the \$125 in addition to any other fees levied by the hospital. According to UMH chief financial officer Valerie Lopez, the new policy will not affect children under the age of 12 or patients over 50. People with a chronic health condition subject to complications will also be seen in the ER. “We are trying to get people to look at what other choices they have to take care of non-emergent conditions,” Lopez said in a story that appeared in last Thursday’s Leader-News. “The other benefit ... is that it should improve the turn-around time for true emergency conditions.” Another incentive for tier one patients to visit CHDI instead of the ER is cost. The average price paid by non-emergent patients who sought care in the ER in 2015 was \$239 compared with \$160 at CHDI. The charge for patients who qualify as low income can be as little as \$40 per visit. The message seems clear: If you or a family member is suffering from a scratchy throat or a temporary stomach upset, better to pay a visit to CHDI or Urgent Care. Leave the hospital’s ER to those who truly face an emergency, and we will all benefit in the long run.