Impact of Emergency Department “Boarding” on Quality Health Care

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ABSTRACT

This brief examines the impact of overcrowding and boarding in Emergency Departments on quality of care and health outcomes as well as the potential impact of new CMS benchmarks to improve patient flow in emergency departments.

The American College of Emergency Physicians task force report on boarding identified these consequences of overcrowding and boarding: increased number of walk outs, medical errors, deaths, ambulance diversion, and increased medical negligence claims. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid services will implement new benchmarks to improve patient flow and reduce the amount of time patients wait in emergency rooms. Many small community hospitals operate on very narrow profit margins. If payments to these hospitals are reduced because they can’t meet the new CMS benchmarks, there is significant risk of reducing access to emergency care. The hospitals most affected by these new standards will be small rural facilities, who already struggle to survive.

In order to avoid penalizing small hospitals, payment should not be decreased based on achieving a benchmark. The ED flow-through measures need to be monitored and trended. Hospitals receiving the highest percentiles should be incentivized to continue their success. Small hospitals in rural and underserved areas that are not able to attain higher standards due to lack of resources need time to improve their services. They need to be provided assistance to accomplish the highest quality of care.