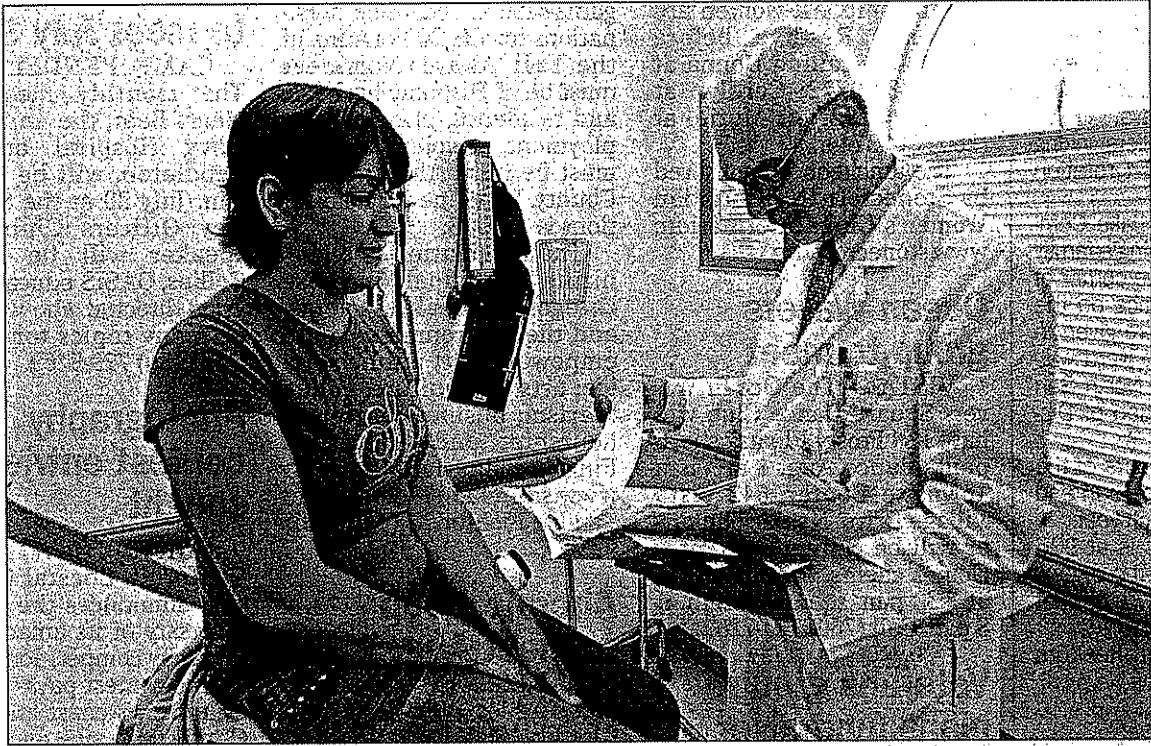


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ELECTRONIC LINK AIDS PATIENTS



WALDO NILO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Maria Lopez of Vista is treated by Dr. Enrique Boquin at the Vista Community Clinic on Wednesday.

A SECOND OPINION

Tri-City referrals cause spike at Vista Community Clinic

PAUL SISSON
STAFF WRITER

VISTA — Officials at the Vista Community Clinic said they are seeing increasing numbers of patients coming through their doors, and they attributed much of it to better communication with the emergency department at Tri-City Medical Center.

Barbara Mannino, the clinic's chief executive officer, said the number of patients referred by Tri-City has increased sixfold since the two organizations established an electronic link between doctors and schedulers in February 2007.

The system allows the hospital to electronically notify the clinic about uninsured patients that come to Tri-City's emergency room, so that the clinic

can contact those patients for follow-up care.

With the old paper-based system, it was up to patients to call the clinic and set up an appointment. Often, those patients would not seek the follow-up care and end up in the emergency room again, officials said.

"The minute we started (the new system), the referrals just went through the roof," Mannino said.

Patients appear to appreciate the change. Maria Lopez, who made a recent visit to the clinic for a checkup, said through an interpreter that she prefers to receive treatment in a doctor's office rather than the hospital.

Lopez said she doesn't have insurance and would have to use the emergency room if the clinic was not available.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know where else I could go," she said.

Before making the change, doctors at Vista Community Clinic saw about 600 patients per year who were referred directly from Tri-City's emergency department. Now the number is closer to 3,600, Mannino said.

All patients referred either have no medical insurance or no primary care doctor.

Mannino said the clinic has had to hire extra personnel and expand its hours to cope with the influx of patients. She said that has further strained the organization's \$24 million operating budget, which relies on grants and donations to help cover the gap between what its frequently poor patients can

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LOCAL

NORTH COUNTY TIMES

B

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(LCVO)

"The more patients you can get into primary care, the fewer you will have come into the emergency department with nonemergency problems."

— DR. CARY MELLS
Director of the Tri-City
Emergency Medical Group

CLINIC

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pay and what it costs to treat them.

The clinic operates in five locations in Vista and Oceanside.

Still, Mannino said she does not lament the spike in demand.

"It's what we're here for. This is our mission," she said.

Tri-City officials said they could not provide specific information on how or whether the change has affected the number of emergency room patients the hospital sees, or whether Tri-City has seen a decline in the number of uninsured patients visiting the emergency room.

Hospital officials said

members of Tri-City's finance department were too busy working on an audit to compile that information.

But Dr. Cary Mells, director of the Tri-City Emergency Medical Group, which runs the hospital's emergency room, said recently he believed that a better referral system has meant fewer runny noses and other nonemergency cases in the emergency room.

"The more patients you can get into primary care, the fewer you will have come into the emergency department with nonemergency problems," Mells said.

Research performed by the San Diego Business Healthcare Connection found that the average cost of a trip to the emergency room is \$3,300. Mannino said it costs about

\$100 for a regular checkup at the clinic.

Mells also said patients who receive treatment for legitimate emergencies at the hospital often need follow-up care from a primary care doctor after they are discharged. When a patient does not have insurance, follow-up visits may never happen and patients can end up back in the emergency room with a more severe case of the problem that sent them there in the first place.

The electronic referral system that now links hospital and clinic replaces a paper-based system that has been in operation since 1995. The new system is built into Tri-City's computerized patient charting system.

When a doctor fills out a discharge order, the computer

asks for a referral and defaults to the clinic if no other primary care doctor is specified. Data on patient referrals are then collected and sent to the clinic, where a crew of 12 schedulers calls each patient up to three times to set up an appointment.

There are plans in the works to help Vista Community Clinic lessen its workload, officials said.

Mannino said that a \$60,000 grant from the Tri-City Healthcare Foundation will help North County Health Services clinics use the same electronic referral system and spread patients to its 10 facilities that are scattered between Encinitas and Ramona.

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