Emergency department website not worth the wait

To the Editor: NSW Health's latest initiative, www.emergencywait.com.au, is a website that presents real-time information about estimated waiting times at 58 emergency departments (EDs) in New South Wales. Similar websites have been used in other Australian states, including South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria, as well as overseas, in Ontario, Canada, and in Memphis, Tennessee. I am concerned that this initiative will be counterproductive and will add further congestion to our already overcrowded EDs.

Extended waiting times are a longstanding problem at EDs. They have traditionally been attributed to staff shortages, delays in pathology and imaging tests,[1] and inadequate funding. However, there is another major contributor to waiting times that rarely attracts attention in the lay media — the overwhelming number of patients who inappropriately seek medical attention in EDs and would be better served by a general practitioner. Much of the work in EDs involves treating patients with non-acute and non-urgent problems. Recent examples from my personal experience include a man requesting a prescription for antiepileptic medication, a perimenopausal woman with many months of irregular menstrual bleeding, and a young man with a common cold. All of these patients bypassed their GPs, despite their attendances being within normal business hours.

A logical outcome of www.emergencywait.com.au is an increase in the number of non-acute, non-urgent presentations to EDs that are seen to be "quiet". For alongside each hospital's estimated waiting time, the website presents a list of nearby hospitals with the number of patients waiting at each, thereby enabling patients to compare EDs and attend the least busy one. Formal studies are scant, but crude American data indicate a 6%–10% increase in ED patient volume since waiting times were publicised.[2] Although the transparency of www.emergencywait.com.au may help our EDs to share more equitably the burden of inappropriate patient attendances, I expect that it will increase the overall number of such attendances and ultimately *increase* waiting times.

Australian EDs provide excellent, prompt care for patients who have been in accidents or emergencies, but they are neither equipped nor designed to look after individuals who meet neither of these criteria. The solution to overcrowded EDs lies not in websites that publicise waiting times, but in convincing the public that emergency rooms are for emergencies.

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1 Havill JH, Van Alphen S, Fairweather S, Van der Pyl M. Waiting in the emergency department. *N Z Med J* 1996; 109: 159-161.
2 Posted wait times an added advantage to multi-facility systems? *ED Manag* 2011; 23: 41-43. ❑