

UTMB not seeing uninsured patients after Ike

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Shelly Goodson, plagued by health problems, has spent the past year in and out of the offices of Galveston gastroenterologists and endocrinologists.

The uninsured 41-year-old Texas City woman has aluminum poisoning, a damaged digestive system and an adrenal problem that causes her heart rate to dip to 42 beats per minute and race to 160 beats per minute.

On Sept. 11, two days before Hurricane Ike slammed into Galveston, flooding John Sealy Hospital and grinding University of Texas Medical Branch operations to a halt, Goodson had an appointment with a medical branch specialty doctor. That appointment, along with the rest of her appointments with medical branch specialty doctors, has been canceled indefinitely.

"I don't exist to these people anymore," Goodson said. "I can't even get anyone to recognize I'm alive."

No 'Un-sponsored' Patients

Like other Galveston County residents, Goodson has spent the past three months searching for specialty doctors willing to care for uninsured patients. Some 79,000 residents — about 28 percent of the county's population — don't have health insurance, according to Galveston County Health District estimates. Since the hurricane knocked out the hospital's emergency room and scattered specialty doctors across the county, doctors at the medical branch no longer have to accept patients without insurance.

"UTMB is not seeing any un-sponsored patients in any of the clinics, with exception of one follow-up visit," said Marsha Canright, medical branch spokeswoman.

Uninsured patients who relied upon the medical branch to treat their diabetes, cancer, heart disease and liver failure can no longer find treatment.

'Hopelessness'

Those patients are showing up at the county's free clinics with diseases and conditions the clinic's primary care doctors can't treat, such as tumors, severe arthritis, uncontrolled bleeding, liver diseases, kidney failure, heart problems, diabetic complications and cancer, said Dr. Mark Guidry, CEO of the Galveston County Health District.

A woman showed up with painful muscle spasms in her neck. Clinic doctors sent her to a pain clinic in Harris County, where she was refused, and now she's awaiting an appointment at Ben Taub General Hospital in Houston, Guidry said.

A man showed up for treatment of his recently amputated leg. Clinic doctors referred

him to a specialty care doctor in Galveston County, who demanded payment upfront, Guidry said. The man could not afford to pay.

Three case managers that work at the county's 4Cs clinic are trying to find doctors who will treat patients with little or no health insurance, Guidry said. Some mainland doctors will accept patients without insurance, but only one or two of them. Others require upfront cash payments that many uninsured patients can't afford, Guidry said.

"There's a sense of hopelessness there," he said.

In the meantime, their conditions worsen as they delay treatment and physical therapy and run out of medicines, said Kurt Koopmann, health district spokesman.

'A Bad Situation'

Kevin Williams spent three months after the hurricane without physical therapy or medication to treat his 3-year-old back injury because he couldn't get his doctor from the medical branch's pain clinic to see him.

His pain worsened. The back spasms were so severe it felt as if someone were twisting his back to the point his spine would snap, he said. A constant burning and stabbing pain radiated from his lower back to the arch of his foot. The 45-year-old La Marque man called the pain clinic, which moved to League City, every day until he claims he annoyed clinic staff members enough they agreed to refill his medication.

He is one of 220 people in the county's indigent health care program, which pays for health care for residents earning less than \$2,184 a year.

"I have one of those power chairs I use when I go visiting in the neighborhoods to keep the pressure off my back," Williams said. "The longer I go without treatment, I feel like that power chair is going to be permanent and I don't want it to be. ... I'm in a bad situation and it's not like it's going to get any better."

Emergency Rooms

Though the medical branch had scaled back its charity care in recent years, it still provided \$120 million in uncompensated care per year. Uninsured people flocked to the medical branch from all over the region — including Brazoria, Chambers and Jefferson counties — for treatment. Now those patients are flocking to other area emergency rooms, some that lack the elite trauma center the medical branch once had.

Before the hurricane, uninsured patients in Brazoria County were sent to the medical branch to see neurologists, oncologists, gastroenterologists and cardiologists as part of a contract between the county's health district and the medical branch.

Now those patients are sent to one of four emergency rooms in the area, said Dr. Leo O'Gorman, Brazoria County's health director. He didn't know how long those patients were waiting in the emergency room for care.

"It's not a good thing, but we're working on it as best we can," he said.

Impending Crisis

The county is facing an impending crisis if uninsured patients can't get specialty treatment, Guidry said. Those with chronic conditions, such as diabetes, cancer and liver disease, will get sicker and even die without specialty care, he said.

Members of the governing board of the Galveston County 4Cs clinic have been brainstorming ways to shore up specialty care. The board passed a resolution last week supporting a hospital tax district.

Three months after Hurricane Ike, Goodson is still waiting to find a doctor to see her, refill her medication and find out whether she needs a pacemaker.

"Maybe we need to get all the people from the specialty clinics in one parking lot and let UTMB know we're human beings, not numbers," she said. "They've left everybody to die. That's the feeling we have."
