Detox Center Can Be As Good As Emergency Room for Some Drunk Patients

Some inebriated people picked up by emergency medical service ambulance crews can be treated effectively at a detoxification center, instead of an emergency room (ER), according to a new study.

Increasing the use of such centers could reduce costs and lessen crowding of emergency rooms, the researchers note.

"Widespread use of this type of protocol has the potential to provide significant financial savings for the U.S. health care system," lead author David Ross said in a news release. "This population is very frequently transported to the ER by EMS or police, consuming a disproportionate share of resources and contributing to ER overcrowding. A detoxification center is a good alternative to the ER for certain intoxicated patients who just need an appropriately staffed facility to 'dry out.' Our research suggests that EMS personnel can identify patients who are safe for this alternative destination."

The researchers estimate that in 2004, ER visits by people whose only medical issue was inebriation cost about $900 million, Reuters reports.

Ross and colleagues created a checklist with 29 yes-or-no questions for ambulance crews. These questions included whether the patient is cooperating with the ambulance worker's exam, and if the patient is willing to go to the detox center. If the ambulance worker checked "no" on any question, the patient was sent to the ER.

The researchers evaluated the outcome of 718 inebriated patients transported by ambulance workers who used the checklist.

The workers brought 138 to detox centers, and the rest went to the local ER. The detox center had a 24-hour nurse and technicians, who could consult by phone with a physician's assistant and a psychiatrist. They found four patients at the detox center were taken to the ER because of minor complications, but no serious complications were reported.

The findings are published in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

If you are wondering if you have a problem with alcohol or are worried about how a family member, friend, and/or co-worker might be abusing alcohol, then you are taking the right steps. Click here to learn the Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse.