No Snow Days for Hospitals: How One Hospital Deals with Winter Storms

As major snowstorms have recently battered the mid-section of the country, keeping most people home from work and school, hospitals have needed to remain open to care for existing patients and, of course, new patients that need medical care. The University of Kansas Hospital and surrounding clinics make up a small city of people with a population of about 6,000 employees caring for hundreds of patients. The hospital has taken numerous steps to ensure employees remain in good positions to take care of those patients, for example:

- More than 150 cots were set up for employees who chose to stay at the hospital overnight during the nearly foot of snow that fell on Monday night. This helped ensure that at least some employees were there in the morning in case other employees were late getting in due to the road conditions.

- With road conditions in and around the hospital in rough shape, some employees walked from their own homes to the hospital to report for work. "We need to be here to take care of the patients," said Dwayne Walker , a trauma clerk at the University of Kansas Hospital who walked about an hour from his house to the hospital Tuesday morning.

- Shifts were re-configured to avoid shift changes during rush hour and to allow extra time for incoming employees to try to get to work.

- Patients with special circumstances have had specific arrangements made for them by the hospital to ensure treatment is uninterrupted. For example, a University of Kansas Hospital surgeon, in anticipation of the storm, flew in a critical patient to undergo an essential brain surgery procedure. Without this foresight, the patient's necessary operation would have been delayed, putting her health at significant risk because of the storm.

"Our employees understand the importance of their jobs in caring for our patients and keeping this hospital running during Mother Nature's most difficult storms," said Tammy Peterman , chief operating officer and chief nursing officer. "Injuries and illnesses don't stop because of snow days, so we need to be here for patients."

In many cases, the worst part of a snowstorm from a medical perspective is the day or two following the snowfall. Slips and falls on ice along with heart attacks from shoveling heavy snow lead to a significant increase in emergency room visits after a storm.

ER physicians remind everyone to stay inside if possible during winter storms and when it comes time to dig out, consider hiring someone to do it if they are at risk for

a heart attack. Additionally, doctors remind everyone to drink plenty of fluids. Weather events, cold or hot, can leave people dehydrated from extra exertion caused by the extreme temperature and in this case, snow.

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