

A Qualitative Assessment of Reasons for Non-urgent Visits to the Emergency Department (ED): Parent and Health Professionals Opinions

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OBJECTIVE: Each day, children incur more than 69,000 emergency department (ED) visits, with 58% to 82% of them for nonurgent reasons. The objectives of this study were to elicit and to describe guardians' and health professionals' opinions on reasons for nonurgent pediatric ED visits.

METHODS: Focus groups sessions were held with 3 groups of guardians, 2 groups of primary care practitioners, and 1 group of pediatric emergency medicine physicians. Participants identified unique factors and their importance related to nonurgent ED use.

RESULTS: A total of 25 guardians and 42 health professionals participated. Guardians had at least 1 child younger than 5 years, most were self-identified racial/ethnic minorities, and nearly all had taken a child to an ED. Guardians focused on perceived illness severity in their children and needs for diagnostic testing or other interventions, as well as accessibility and availability at times of day that worked for them. Professionals focused on systems issues concerning availability of appointments, as well as parents' lack of knowledge of medical conditions and sense of when use of the ED was appropriate.

CONCLUSIONS: Guardians' concerns about perceptions of severity of illness in children and their schedules must be considered to effectively reduce nonurgent ED use, which may differ from the perceptions of professionals. Health professionals and systems seeking ways to decrease ED utilization may be able to better match capacity to demand both by increasing accessibility to primary care and by working to overcome guardians' perceptions that only EDs can handle acute illnesses or injuries.

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