

Star-Telegram

MedStar may ask taxi services for help as 911 calls about flu-like symptoms surge

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FORT WORTH — The large number of 911 calls from people with H1N1-like symptoms may lead the city's ambulance provider to enlist help from taxi drivers.

"We are seeing a tremendous increase in the number of flu and flu-like-symptom calls," said Lara Kohl, spokeswoman for MedStar, the sole emergency services provider for Fort Worth and 14 surrounding cities. "Many times people with flu or flu-like symptoms don't require emergency care."

In October 2008, MedStar answered 85 flu-related calls, Kohl said.

In the first 25 days of this month, there were 239 flu-related calls.

"It puts stress on our already-overloaded system," she said.

A MedStar advisory board asked the emergency provider to recommend different approaches to treating these patients rather than overwhelming emergency rooms. A decision won't be made until the board meets in December.

Policy change?

Kohl said one option being discussed is not transporting patients who don't require emergency care. Under the current policy, the ambulance service transports patients to a hospital if they request it.

"We are considering changing that policy for the flu season," she said.

With the new approach for nonemergency flu cases, EMS personnel would find the patient alternative medical care at a clinic or with the patient's primary-care doctor. Kohl said patients with nonemergency flu symptoms would be advised to seek treatment there and take a taxi.

"We would pay for that, but we would charge them," Kohl said.

In high demand

The ambulances would be reserved for more serious cases, and patients wouldn't be using an expensive form of medical help, she said. The average cost of ambulance transportation is about \$1,200.

"The whole point is to find the appropriate care and mode of transportation for these cases," Kohl said.

The public has been advised to get the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available. There have been five confirmed H1N1-related deaths in Tarrant County and 14 in Dallas County.

At the JPS Health Network's Fort Worth urgent-care center and John Peter Smith Hospital emergency room, 17 patients were being treated for flu-like symptoms at 4:40 p.m. Wednesday. The two facilities are treating an average of 40 to 60 people a day with flu-like illnesses. Each day, JPS has five to seven such people arrive at the hospital by ambulance.

Jack Bewley, president of Yellow Cab in Fort Worth, said he hasn't been approached about the concept. But he said his company has qualified drivers who have been transporting about 1,000 people a day to health services.

He said his cabs work with Fort Worth's Mobility Impaired Transportation Services to take people to health appointments.

"We do haul people with medical needs every day," he said.

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