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Claudia Belisle, a medical assistant, and Sandy Owusu, an X-ray technician, work at City MD in New Springville.
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STATEN ISLAND

Changing the face of health care

Urgi-Care centers are booming and more are on the way

By Tracey Porpora
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New Dorp resident Marion Mantione needs to see a physician often for medical conditions related to her diabetes.

Because symptoms arise unexpectedly, she often has to see a doctor quickly, and the trek to her Brooklyn-based primary physician isn't always convenient.

So, instead, she recently headed to the ProHealth Circle Urgent

Care Center in Bulls Head.

"I got to see a doctor who was very caring," she said. "This is very convenient. I think we need more of them [urgent care centers] because Staten Island is becoming very crowded, and there are only two hospitals. And to see a doctor, you need an appointment."

And Ms. Mantione will get her wish.

According to the Urgent Care Association of America, there are nine existing urgent care centers on Staten Island.

And the Advance has learned that at least five more of these

SEE **CHANGING**, PAGE A12



Dr. Jeffrey Liva works at ProHealth Urgent Care in Willowbrook.

Changing

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

centers, which are supposed to bridge the gap between an emergency room and doctor's office visit, are opening this year.

Medical professionals say the number of these centers — most staffed with emergency room physicians and equipped with X-ray facilities — will continue to grow.

"Today's urgent care center is a facility that is able to handle a fairly high level of acuity (measurement of the intensity of patient care). You can come here with anything you can go to an ER with, except life or limb threatening issues," said Ryan Goldberg, founder of Circle Health, which is now a division of ProHealth.

Why so many new centers?

The Urgent Care Association of America estimates that there are 9,000 urgent care providers nationwide, with 392 in New York state.

Economists have suggested that the movement toward urgent care is partly due to the Affordable Care Act's mission to reduce health care costs.

"For the insurance companies, urgent care is actually more about cost reducing rather than profit making," said Mary Rose Leacy, an economist and chair of the economics department of Wagner College.

An insurance company might be billed more than \$2,000 for an emergency room visit, while an urgent care visit is less than \$200, said Goldberg.

"Urgent care is cutting the cost for insurance companies," Goldberg added. "Anything that has to be dealt with right away, like cuts, lacerations and broken bones, the insurance companies prefer you go to urgent care rather than the emergency room."

"It's has a lot to do with Obamacare," he added.

If urgent care centers are paid less than hospitals for emergency room visits for the same or similar care,

how do they make money? The answer is simple: Patient volume.

Some urgent care centers — often staffed with one doctor and several physician assistants — can see up to 150 patients a day.

Physician assistants are licensed to work under the supervision of an MD and are trained to provide care for a range of ailments. They are authorized to prescribe routine medications, like antibiotics, but are more cost-effective than having additional physicians on staff. The result is lower overhead.

While a child with a gash in his/her leg who may need stitches will see a doctor, a patient with a fever and sore throat who simply needs a strep test may be treated by a physician assistant at some urgent care centers.

Cost and co-pays

But there's one caveat for the patient. While urgent care centers take most insurance plans, the co-pay can be higher than that paid to a primary physician.

"Urgent care costs are much less (than an emergency room visit), but you're still paying more than a primary care visit. On Staten Island, there's some confusion, where people don't understand why they aren't just paying a \$15 copay," said Goldberg.

Depending on your insurance plan, the fee or co-pay at an urgent care center can be up to \$150.

A booming business

ProHealth Circle Urgent Care last year purchased two Heartland Medical facilities — in New Springville and Annadale — and turned the walk in clinics into state-of-the-art urgent care centers, said Goldberg.

The company is moving the Annadale center to an Eltingville storefront formerly occupied by Animal Kingdom, and the company is opening a fourth center in Tottenville in May, said Goldberg.

CityMD is another large urgent care center provider that just expanded to Staten Island. With a new center in New Springville, CityMD,



Dr. Quin Benson, a staff physician with City MD.

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which has 40 medical offices throughout the Metropolitan area, will be opening more Staten Island facilities in the future, said Dr. Richard Park, CityMD CEO.

While CityMD is only in the business of urgent care, many hospitals and medical care providers are joining forces with urgent care companies to open centers.

"Large systems, in order to save money, have to control where their patients go. So most urgent cares are part of a bigger strategy," said Dr. Park. "It's leakage protection. They can't have their patients go to another health care system."

Dr. Parks cited the partnership between North Shore-LIJ Health System and GoHealth, which opened one urgent care center in Grant City last week, and is opening another in Great Kills in about a month. North Shore-LIJ Health System includes Staten Island University Hospital.

"GoHealth is a joint venture between the North Shore Health System and a private company that specializes in building these clinics and linking them to large health care chains," said Dr. Robert Korn, the North Shore LIJ medical director for GoHealth.

Many private practitioners said urgent care centers are cutting into their patient visits — and in turn, lowering their income.

"This is going to kill us," said Dr. Ann Olsen, a physician with University Physicians Group in Dongan Hills.