

Cool and Calm at the Center Of an Emergency Room Maelstrom

Department's Chief Juggles Patients at a Busy Bronx Hospital



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By WINNIE HU

The woman, in the midst of a seizure, moaned from a row of stretchers parked in the hallway of the emergency room at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx.

"Everything's full," a doctor called out.

That was when Dr. Fernando Jara stepped in. Ducking into one room after another, he scanned medical charts until he found a patient who had been seen only moments before. "We're going to move him," he said. "We're going to bring that other patient in here."

Dr. Jara has become an expert at juggling patients while running what may be the single busiest emergency room in New York City. As chairman of the emergency medicine department at Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center, he and his staff handled a staggering 173,000 visits in 2013, from patients who showed up with everything including gunshot wounds and chronic conditions like asthma, diabetes and hypertension. Many of them had no health insurance, no access to regular checkups and nowhere else to turn.

Lincoln's emergency room completed a long-awaited move last week to a newly renovated 58,000-square-foot wing, doubling its size and adding 53 beds, bringing the total to 106. The \$24 million expansion, financed by the city and the Health and Hospitals Corporation, was carried out in stages over more than two years by the general contractor, Stalco Construction, to ensure that the emergency room did not have to shut down for even a single night.

"In the community, 'emergency' is defined as anything that is emergent in their eyes and needs to be taken care of right away," said Dr. Jara, 54, who grew up in the Bronx. "They may come in here for a sprained ankle and we see their blood pressure, and that's a much bigger issue. It's not always straightforward."

Lincoln, part of the city's public hospital system, admits patients regardless of their ability to pay, in a borough with



high rates of poverty, unemployment, violent crime and chronic disease. Lincoln's executive director, Milton Nuñez, said that while each emergency room visit cost the hospital an average of

\$500, the patients themselves often paid far less. Hospital workers help those with no insurance apply for financial assistance, including Medicaid, and refer them to clinics afterward for preventive

care. Dr. Fernando Jara, top, working last month at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. He can often be found working 12-hour shifts; at left, he speaks with Emma Andalus, 83, who was ready to be discharged. Emergency room patients, below, wait on gurneys.

care.

In 2013, Lincoln handled nearly 15 percent of the 1,170,938 emergency room visits to all of the city's 11 public hospitals, which are operated by the Health and Hospitals Corporation. Ram Raju, the corporation's president, said that Lincoln had attracted a loyal patient base because of its 175-year-old roots in the Bronx community, and that its wide-ranging efforts to help local residents addressed problems as diverse as asthma and substance abuse.

Kenneth E. Raske, president of the Greater New York Hospital Association, said Lincoln had done an "outstanding job" of treating E.R. patients, despite many challenges. "Like many Bronx hospitals, Lincoln Hospital is located in a medically underserved area marked by a lack of primary care physicians, low-income residents without health insurance, and high rates of chronic illness such as diabetes," Mr. Raske said. "Given these health care access issues, it's no surprise that Lincoln's E.R. is extremely busy."

Dr. Jara, an unassuming figure in his white coat, swept through a warren of crowded rooms on a recent afternoon, sidestepping stretchers and medical equipment. He stopped at a crowded nursing station and slid into the only empty seat to check patient assignments on a computer.

The emergency room staff of 244 — 34 attending physicians, 40 residents, 20 nurse practitioners and physician assistants, and 150 registered nurses — is broken up into three teams (red, blue and green), each with its own work area and patients.