

St. Joe's sets a good example on innovation

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It's not easy making changes in large and complex institutions such as hospitals. Even small adjustments can be unwieldy in implementation.

So it's impressive that the emergency department at **St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton** has instituted measures aimed at reducing or eliminating ER wait times. Although it's early days, the changes seem to be having a positive impact.

During the day since Jan. 8, ER patients see a doctor immediately. The doctor will send patients home if they don't need to be there, order tests, give out medication and manage pain. Patients with minor or uncomplicated conditions now see a doctor within an average of 35 minutes, down from 3.7 hours and the total time they spend in ER is about 90 minutes to two hours less than before. The changes have also reduced the amount of time it takes to off-load ambulance patients so paramedics are available more quickly for emergency calls.

Do not take this as an invitation to start heading to **St. Joe's ER**. If you have a non-urgent condition, you should head to your family doctor, a walk-in clinic or one of the city's two urgent care centres.

St. Joseph's CEO Kevin Smith says at least six months of data are needed to judge the impact. For that period, doctors agreed to each work 20 more shifts a year with little or no extra pay; that may not be sustainable. Regardless, the hospital's willingness to innovate sets a good example for other health care institutions.