

Hospital to offer emergency care, restraining orders

By JOHN PETRICK, STAFF WRITER | 08/02/2009

The emergency room meets the courtroom in a joint venture being launched this week between St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center and the Passaic County Courthouse to better help domestic violence victims through technology.



ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. James Pruden, director of telemedicine at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center, left, and state Family Court Judge Richard M. Freid, seen on the monitor, illustrate a telemedicine cart.

The Passaic Vicinage Hospital Project will allow victims coming into St. Joseph's ER for treatment to obtain temporary restraining orders from a judge right then and there via teleconferencing.

Officials say many victims come into the ER ready to take court action, only to back down an hour or so later after thinking about it. The immediacy of going before a judge to seek the order right on the spot not only eliminates that hesitancy but saves the victim the time and, in some cases, the risk of having to leave the hospital to go to court.

It also allows the judge to actually see and even take still shots of the victim's injuries to make an informed decision.

"You don't know where the perpetrator is," said Dr. Lauren La Porta, chairman of the department of psychiatry at St. Joseph's. "There is such an element of fear that if we can provide them with a safe environment, and they don't have to leave the hospital to go down to the courthouse all by themselves, I think it's a tremendous advantage."

State Superior Court Presiding Family Judge Michael K. Diamond in Paterson agreed that the fear element cannot be overstated.

"A lot of people who come here are scared to death. They want a police escort to their cars," he said of domestic violence victims coming to family court at 401 Grand St.

The little time saved having to make the trip to the courthouse can make all the difference, adds Dr. James Pruden, director of telemedicine at St. Joseph's.

"That's where this shortcut for getting a TRO is important. Because the difference of even a half an hour, of having to ride from a hospital to a courthouse, is the point where somebody could change their minds," Pruden said.

Pruden pointed to a recent study conducted by the University of Miami that found that 30 percent of women in child-bearing years who come to a hospital ER with any kind of trauma are victims of domestic violence.

St. Joseph's officials could not quantify precisely how many domestic violence patients come to their hospital, estimating that it's at least "several a month."

Social workers intervene when the patient is upfront about the nature of the injury, or when doctors suspect something's up. The social workers then explain what options are available, such as seeking a TRO. But some patients simply deny, or hide, what really happened to them.

While the technology is simple — the judge appearing on one end of the monitor and the victim on the other — Diamond noted the clarity of the image is striking and the ability to take still shots of injuries is important.

"We can zero right in, on the screen, to see bruises. We can take a still shot right from the television picture, if there's a scar. If there is a document, we can zero in on that so you can read it plain as day," he said.

Diamond said New Jersey Chief Justice Stuart Rabner recently came to the county courthouse to witness a test run of the system, which was conceived locally. Passaic County is the first in the state to have such a joint venture, and court officials are looking at it as a pilot that might be implemented elsewhere.

E-mail: petrick@northjersey.com