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By Joe Fahy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Asthma attacks have often sent a wheezing Jennifer Ramsey on frightening trips to the emergency room.

But Ramsey, 18, of East McKeesport, has made fewer of those trips since paramedic Jeff Kvederis began showing her ways to keep her asthma under control.

The visits by Kvederis, training coordinator for Guardian Angel Ambulance Services, are part of a larger effort by EMedHealth, an initiative that uses emergency medical service workers to try to prevent -- rather than respond to -- health emergencies.

In Ramsey's case, for instance, Kvederis checked her home for things that could trigger an asthma attack. He also showed her how to use a peak flow meter, a device that indicates when her breathing capacity has dropped. Taking regular readings can signal when she might need to use prescribed medicines to head off an attack.

Since it began five years ago, EMedHealth has involved about 40 EMS workers from 20 or more area ambulance services in preventive health care projects, said Dan Swayze, director of employer health programs for the UPMC Health Plan and EmedHealth's former executive director.

A joint effort of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's prehospital care program and the Center for Emergency Medicine, EMedHealth contracts with ambulance services to provide emergency medical technicians or paramedics for the prevention projects, Swayze said. It also provides those workers with training.

John McAfee, Guardian Angel's president, said many people could avoid hospitalizations if their health conditions were treated earlier.

Besides the human cost, treating illnesses when they become a crisis is often much more expensive, said Mark Sevco, president of UPMC Braddock, which is incorporating the asthma prevention project into a larger initiative to address health disparities in areas served by the hospital.



Tony Tye, Post-Gazette

Paramedic (R) Jeff Kvederis counsels asthma patient Jennifer Ramsey, 18, at her home, on the use of her flowmeter and on preventive health measures, as part of a program to prevent trips to the emergency room or other costly medical interventions.

UPMC Braddock, which serves a population with high rates of asthma, plans to enroll 40 patients in the asthma prevention program; fourteen have been enrolled so far. Swayze said the program may identify additional patients through churches, health centers or community groups.

Asthma is common among many groups of people, especially blacks, Hispanics and people with low incomes, said Dr. Andrej Petrov of UPMC's division of pulmonary, allergy and critical medicine.

Using paramedics or other medical personnel to follow-up with asthma problems is a good idea, he said, in part because many patients do not comply with therapy or have trouble recognizing when their symptoms are starting to worsen.

Besides the asthma program, EMedHealth also has used paramedics and EMTs for years to administer flu shots. It also offers education programs on domestic violence prevention, chronic disease management and proper installation of child safety seats.

Dr. Paul Paris, EMedHealth's medical director, also would like to use EMS personnel to educate emergency room patients who are not facing life-threatening injuries.

"When someone's in the emergency department, it's a teachable moment," he said, noting that the prevention efforts might include topics like smoking cessation or preventing falls.

Though most of its projects have been funded by grants, EMedHealth was recently hired by UPMC Health Plan to conduct health screenings.

Currently, EMS workers can provide some of those services only under a doctor's supervision. But the state is revising its EMS guidelines and may expand the ability of those workers to provide preventive care, said state EMS director Joe Schmider.

"EMS is more than just going to auto accidents. The market has really expanded into public education," he said.

Proponents cite a variety of reasons to do so. Many doctors have limited time for preventive medicine and rural areas, in particular, may have a shortage of physicians. Yet EMS workers are a trusted and familiar presence in nearly every community.

Delivering preventive care also could help ambulance services diversify their revenue streams and provide extra work for their personnel. Wages for EMS workers tend to be modest, and some, through age or injury, may have trouble meeting the physical demands of responding to 911 calls.

Kvederis, who is unable to make ambulance runs because of a foot injury, said the asthma prevention project has given him a way to continue interacting with patients.

"To be able to work with people to improve their quality of life is something I enjoy," said Kvederis, who began working as an EMT in 1979. "It's been my life, working in the field of EMS and with people."