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## Billboard touting low wait times the latest move in battle for patients

Emergency room doctor Scott Cross said he's tired of hearing horror stories about sick and injured patients waiting in emergency room lobbies as minutes tick into hours. Sure, not every emergency room is fast, but Cross is confident his emergency room at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center treats patients as quickly as any. "For us, it's mostly patient perception as opposed to reality," said Cross, who has worked in eight different emergency rooms since 1996. "This is the fastest ER program I've ever worked with."

EIRMC is battling the perception of slow emergency room care with a billboard. The billboard trumpets the emergency room's average wait time for patients to check in and see a doctor. The digit display might read two minutes one hour or 22 minutes the next. The figure reflects the hospital's rolling, four-hour average.

EIRMC's average wait time was 17 minutes in December and 13 in January. The national average is 40 minutes, according to a January article published in *Emergency Physicians Monthly*.

Other area emergency rooms also boast low wait times. Patients wait nine to 12 minutes on average to see a doctor at Portneuf Medical Center, emergency director Lance Howell said. Bingham Memorial Hospital spokesman Paul Kotter said last week that Bingham's average wait time for the previous 10 days was 23 minutes. Madison Memorial Hospital doesn't keep a door-to-doctor average.

EIRMC also posts its rolling average on its website and in its lobby. The average is also available via text message. Howell said he appreciated EIRMC's transparency but wasn't sure how it helped patients. "What are you going to measure it to if you don't have another competing emergency room in the immediate area?" Howell said. "Me, personally, I'd rather stay away from it. What if you had a door-to-doctor time of 15 minutes and you were promised 10? You kind of paint yourself in a corner."

Too many patients showing symptoms of heart attack or stroke go to clinics or personal doctors because they think emergency rooms take too long, EIRMC spokeswoman Cindy Smith-Putnam said. Those patients must transfer to an emergency room when the severity of their conditions is discovered. Lost time limits both medicine and treatment options. About 5.5 patients a day transfer to EIRMC's emergency room from other medical providers and emergency rooms, Smith-Putnam said.

Vickie Boll, a physician assistant at 1st Choice Urgent Care-Medical in Blackfoot, said her facility transfers patients to emergency rooms between once a week and once a month. Urgent care facilities don't intend to compete with emergency rooms, she said. "The reason for urgent cares is to take the stress off emergency rooms so they don't get bogged down," Boll said.

EIRMC emergency coordinator Brad Hobbs said the billboard is designed to convince people to go to the emergency room first and save valuable time.

"One of the first risk factors of a heart attack is denial," Hobbs said. "They don't think, 'It's life and limb. I better go to the ER.' They think, 'Well, this is indigestion. I'll go to a doc-in-the-box. I'm going to downplay this because I hear the rhetoric of how slow it is at the ER.'"

Smith-Putnam said EIRMC's campaign is a response to advertisements for another emergency room trying to draw customers by promising a low wait time.

A Bingham TV ad states that a 20-minute drive could save patients hours of waiting. The ad, which has run for more than a year, was prompted by feedback from Bingham patients, Kotter said. "We've had patients who came from another facility that have told us that they have had to wait a long time," Kotter said. "We've had patients tell us they left other facilities and driven to ours. Due to that response, we've advertised that way."

Smith-Putnam said the billboard is a data-driven way to fire back at anybody recommending that patients drive out of Idaho Falls for emergency care. "It's not just about hurt feelings or that they are kind of dissing us," Smith-Putnam said. "It's that it's bad medicine."

Time check - Options to check the four-hour rolling average wait time at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center: Go to [eirmc.com](http://eirmc.com).

See the billboard facing south on South Yellowstone Avenue near Pancheri Drive.