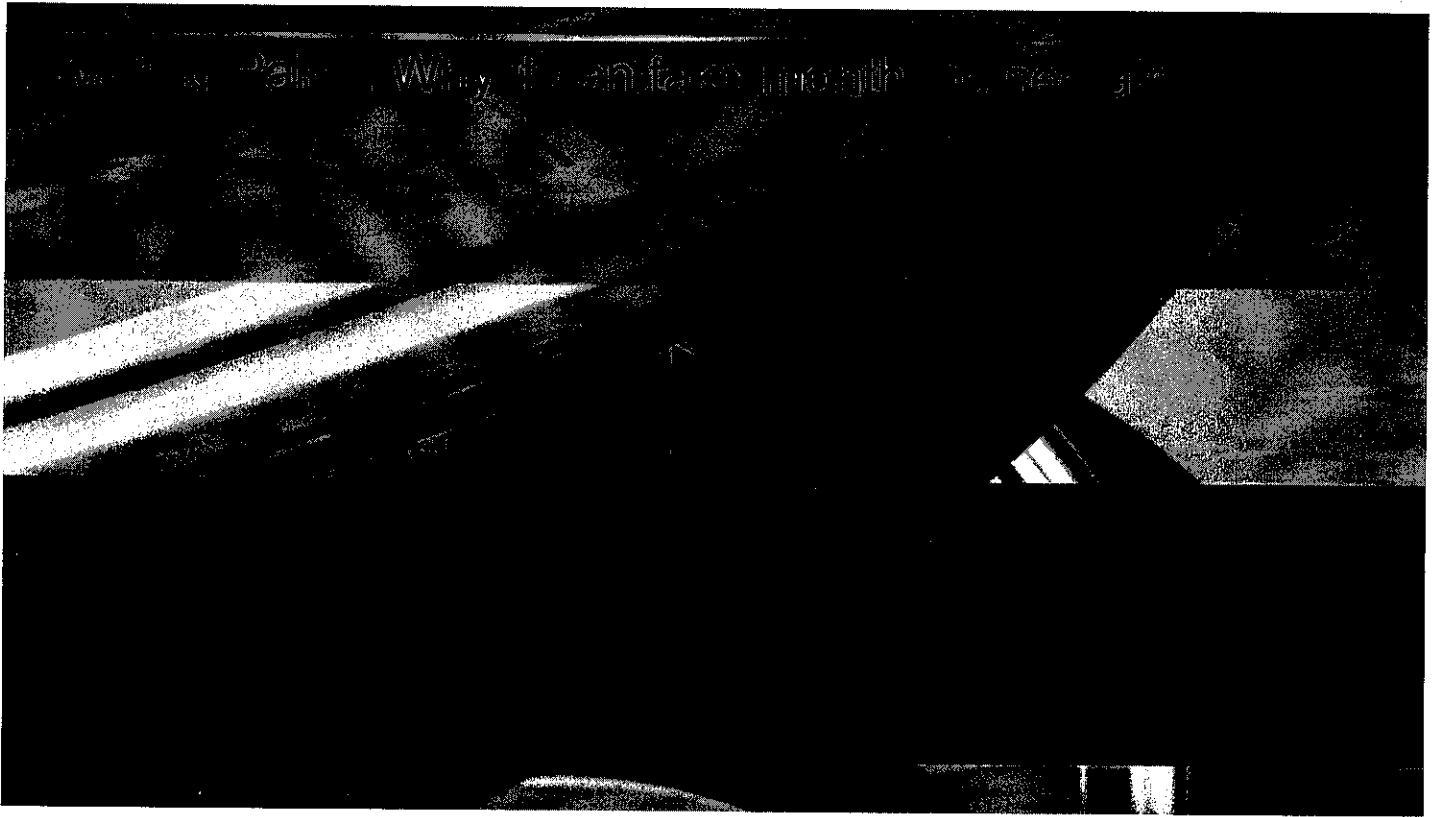


Waiting Pains: Why it can take months to see a specialist at UVM



By Cat Viglienzoni | Posted: Wed 6:28 PM, Apr 17, 2019 | Updated: Wed 6:43 PM, Apr 17, 2019

BURLINGTON, Vt. (WCAX) Wait times for patients to see medical specialists at Vermont's largest hospital network can take months, according to some patients we've heard from. A Green Mountain Care Board report in 2017 found that 37 specialties weren't meeting access standards. So what progress has been made since then?

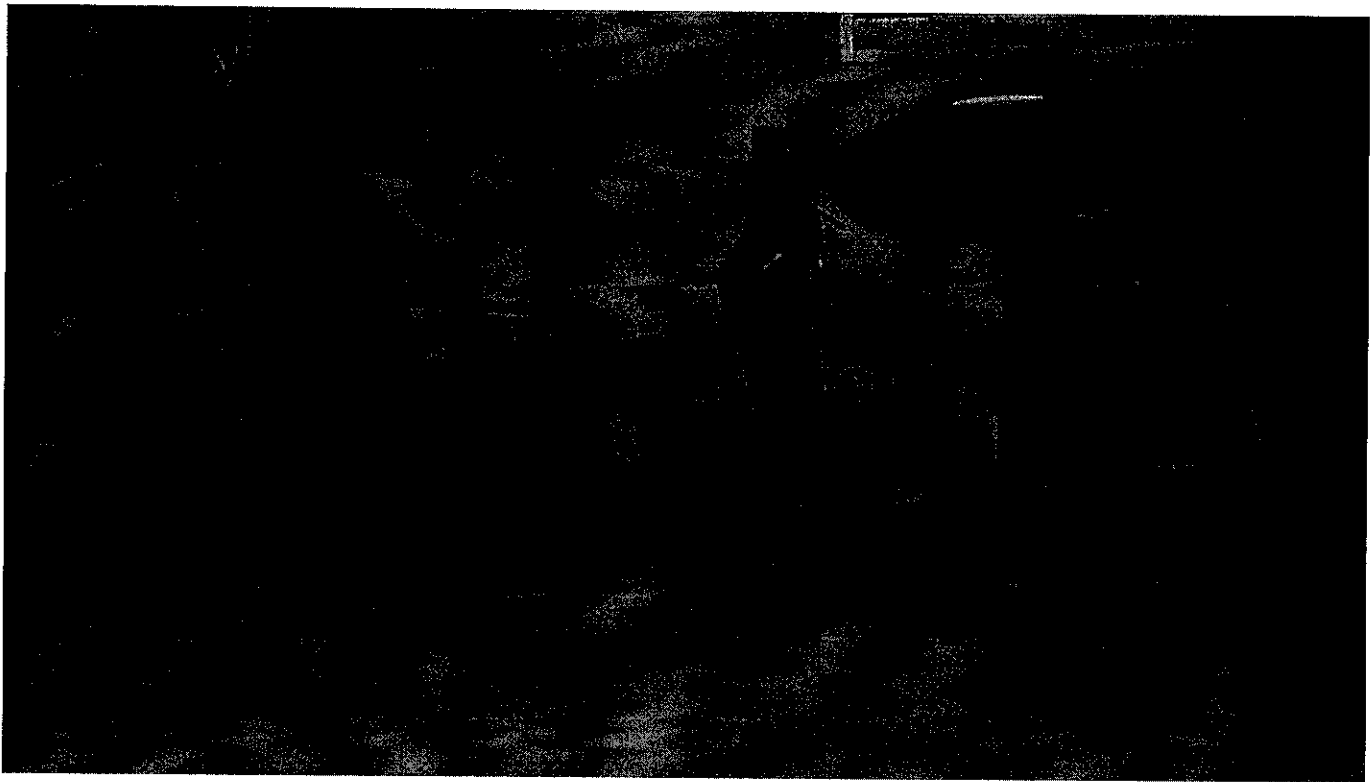
While it's easy to get a fast appointment for most emergency procedures -- like having a dermatologist examine a potentially cancerous mole -- other wait times can be lengthy. If you're a teenager who needs acne treatment you might have to wait six months. Still, for other ailments, even non-emergencies can be serious hardships for patients.

"I was hard-pressed to get out of bed and make it five steps to the bathroom at first," said Richard Knight. The North Ferrisburgh man says he's been in pain every day since October. His feet hurt -- badly. His primary care doctor wasn't sure what it is and couldn't help him, so Knight was told he needed to see a rheumatologist, but it took four months to see a specialist.

"I got a letter that said I had an appointment for April 15," Knight said. "Very frustrating. I can't work right now. I've been out of work for months and no income to help with anything."

Knight's story isn't unique. We've heard from others who say their appointments to see specialists within the UVM Health Network were booked months out. A similar story to what we heard last year.

"We're in a better place than we were, but there's absolutely room to go," said Dr. Jim Ulager, a primary care doctor and head of the UVM Medical Center task force looking at wait times. He says, their first steps were to set goals. Those include making sure patients would hear back within three days after a referral about when their



appointment is, and that 80 percent of patients would be seen at a specialty clinic within two-weeks.

So are they meeting those? Dr. Ulager says while overall they are making progress, it's a mixed bag. He says they're hitting the goal of seeing patients within two weeks about 25 to 50 percent of the time. But one clinic was only at 15 percent. And while many clinics have gotten the referral lag down to four days or less, they found at least one where patients were waiting a month just to find out when their appointment is.

"That's not okay at all," Ulager said. He says while they are hiring for many specialist positions including gastroenterology, cardiology, rheumatology, and pulmonology, adding doctors is only part of the solution. "That's expensive to the system."

He says they're also getting creative by streamlining internal processes and using tele-health, so primary care providers can try to address patient's specialty concerns while they're already in the doctor's office. "When specialists are doing e-consults, they can do them much faster," Ulager said.

But changes aren't happening fast enough for patients like Knight. "I'm completely in limbo right now," he said. He's concerned that in the months he's been waiting, his mystery condition could have been getting worse.

Reporter Cat Viglienzoni: What would be your message to the people at the medical center about wait times?

Richard Knight: It's too long, for someone in my condition.

Knight said the doctor at his appointment on the 15th was very professional. He was diagnosed with gout and given some medicine. He says he's feeling a lot better now.

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Waiting Pains: The challenge of wooing doctors to Vermont

By *Cat Viglienzoni* |

Posted: Thu 6:11 PM, Apr 18, 2019 |

Updated: Thu 6:50 PM, Apr 18, 2019

BURLINGTON, Vt. (WCAX) We continue our investigation into wait times at Vermont's largest hospital network.

Wednesday, we told you that the University of Vermont Health Network's efforts to reduce wait times for specialists have been a mixed bag. Depending on the specialty you need help from, you may still have to wait months for your appointment. And we told you the network has been hiring doctors to try to fix that.

One local doctor told WCAX News the problem is with hiring but also with specialists leaving. Right now, the UVM Medical Center has 648 doctors. Last year, they hired 111. Forty-five doctors left and there are 70 jobs open.

But getting those filled is not as simple as just posting a job ad because with an aging population around New England, there's a lot of competition for doctors. And our Cat Viglienzoni found out Vermont may need to get creative and pony up the cash to woo them here.

"I first got here in October, so just as the leaves were at their peak, which was intentionally planned," said Dr. James Metz, a pediatrician.

Metz has only worked at the UVM Medical Center for half a year but he's no stranger to Vermont. He grew up here, got a medical degree at UVM, and then, like so many other medical grads, left for the big city. But after 12 years in Seattle, he came back.

"I think I was ready to move back to a smaller place like Vermont," Metz said.

Usually, Vermont's size doesn't attract doctors here. In fact, it's a hindrance.

"You have to think of Burlington as a small country town," said Art Woolf, an economics professor at UVM.

Woolf says when Vermont tries to compete with metropolitan areas like Boston, we are at a disadvantage because there is only one major medical center.

"You don't have any choice of where else you can work, there's just nothing," Woolf said.

That goes for doctors and their spouses.

"Most physicians have spouses that are high-paid professionals," Woolf said.

The UVM Health Network admits part of the challenge is spouse placement. Doctors won't want to work here if their partners also can't find jobs in the community.

"It's hard to recruit," said Kevin Mullin, the chair of the Green Mountain Care Board.

Mullin says the shortage of providers spans all areas of the medical field and leads to problems like wait times or burnout. He says hospitals are trying to pay competitively but specialists may not want to work in an area where they will be on call more often.

"Today's workforce doesn't expect that," Mullin said.

To fix the shortage he thinks Vermont needs to get creative and drastic. Think about paying for school, not just loans, on the condition that graduates would stay here to work after they're done.

"Because if we don't start doing things more creatively, if we don't start adding capacity at our programs, we're just not going to have enough people to take care of the medical needs of the citizens of the state," Mullin said.

Metz says his decision was made easier because his family and partner were here. He says working at a smaller medical institution like UVM has similar opportunities.

Reporter Cat Viglienzoni: How would you "sell" Vermont, if you will?

Dr. James Metz: I think there's a lot to be said for working in a place where you get to know people really well and have some roots like I do in Vermont.

Hiring isn't a problem limited to specialists, though. This week on "You Can Quote Me" we speak with a recruiting agency in Vermont that says it's seeing shortages across multiple professions in the medical field, especially nursing. Hear what they say employers here need and what could help. That's this Sunday at 7:30 a.m.
