

# Extent and Appropriateness of Emergency Department Services Usage by Foreign Workers in Singapore

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## Abstract

*The objective of this study was to determine the extent and appropriateness of emergency department services usage by foreign workers. A prospective questionnaire survey of foreign workers who attended the Emergency Department (ED) of Tan Tock Seng Hospital was conducted from 30 December 1996 to 29 January 1997. A foreign worker was defined as a non-citizen, non-permanent resident working in Singapore, excluding students and tourists. Demographic and clinical data were collected. During the study period, 7409 patients above the age of 15 attended the ED of which 1174 (15.8%) were foreign workers. Forty-seven per cent of these foreign workers could not speak English, of whom 48.2% did not come with any English-speaking companion. Most of their ED visits were on weekdays and during office hours. Of the foreign workers, 43.1% were classified as non-emergency by ED doctors compared to 6.7% of other ED patients (P <0.01). Trauma-related complaints accounted for 43.4% while febrile and minor infectious illnesses accounted for 26.7% of foreign workers' complaints. Admissions from ED into the hospital were 17.1% for foreign workers and 28.3% (P <0.01) for other patients. Language barrier and lack of information on types of health care services available could have led to the high proportion of inappropriate use of ED services by foreign workers. Most of their complaints were minor injuries and illnesses which could be managed by non-ED health care providers. Care provided across a language barrier raises ethical and medico-legal questions. A multi-agency approach involving the Manpower and Health Ministries, employer and foreign worker representatives is needed to eliminate language barrier and help these workers to use health care services appropriately.*

*Ann Acad Med Singapore 1999; 28:199-204*

*Key words: Appropriate use of health care services, Language barrier, Non-emergency*

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