

ANS: A certainty for Alaska Natives

By Ted Mala MD

There are three things certain in the life of an Alaska Native: taxes, death and going to ANS.

It has many names, both official and unofficial. Officially it is called the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) and unofficially by its old name, "ANS" (Alaska Native Service) or just plain "THE hospital in Anchorage."

Through its doors pass Natives and non-Natives from every village and city in the state. It is just a fact of life. If you really want to find out what's happening, just take a seat in the lobby and watch life go by. "OOOOOhh . . . there's Kenneth and Ethel from Kotzebue . . . haven't seen you in years . . . how you doing?" The scene repeats itself many times the same day. In fact, part of the package of visiting a patient includes the words, "Well, I think I'll go down and sit in the lobby for a while. See you."

But people do go to the hospital because they don't feel good either. They made the mistake of not making an appointment several weeks ahead of time before they got sick and so now have their name changed to "walk in" patient.

A "walk in" is anyone who does not have an appointment to be seen and cannot wait for several weeks to talk to a doctor.

Congratulations . . . you now get to see the OTHER lobby, the one by the emergency room. If you are not bleeding a lot, don't have severe pain, don't have a broken arm or leg, don't have a high fever or are not unconscious, bring lots of books to read or things to do to entertain yourself for a few hours. Emergencies always go first.

Even though YOUR emergency is the only one around as far as you are concerned, someone worse off than yourself always seems to turn up and push you further back down the line.

So you ask, is there any way to "beat the system" and not have to camp out in the lobby waiting to be seen?

Dr. Robert Fortune, Director of the "Walk-In-Clinic," has written an Information Sheet which you can pick up from them which gives you a few "tips" on how to cut down on waiting so long. They include:

1) Make an appointment whenever possible with the Family Medicine Clinic on 2-

South, or your own doctor (Specialty Clinic). Always make an appointment for problems that you have had for a long time, refills on medicine or physical exams.

2) Come to the clinic on weekdays, preferably in the MIDDLE OF THE WEEK, and register around 8:30 a.m. or 12:30 p.m.

3) Give the clerk a clear idea of what you need so that she can let the nurses and doctors know.

The Anchorage (ANMC) Walk-In Clinic is open on Monday - Friday from 9-11 a.m., 1-5 p.m. and 6-9 p.m.; on Saturdays and Sundays from 1-5 p.m. and closed on holidays except for emergencies only.

Dr. Fortune also adds that Walk-In patients are not accepted between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. so that the doctors will have time to "catch up" before the afternoon. Does that mean that they need two hours to "catch up" on lunch and a siesta (nap)?

NO WAY, he says and adds that they often get less than 15 minutes for lunch and sometimes miss it entirely!

If you have a problem that can wait, call the appointment clinic on 2-South. Their phone numbers are 265-9103 for

adults and 265-9104 for children. It also helps to know your chart number when you call.

Long waits for emergency room service are the rule and not the exception. I have taken patients (friends) to the emergency room of Providence Hospital and it took us more than three hours to finally get finished. If you need a lab test or X-ray, that also really adds on the waiting time.

So you see the moral of the story is that it is better to understand ANS and how it works than to curse it and give up. From the patient end of the stethoscope, everyone wants to be seen faster by a nurse or doctor.

From the hospital end, they say that there is not enough staff and room to take care of everyone right away and that they need more money to

expand.

My own experience is that most hospital emergency rooms are abused. A lot of the patients that I saw were not real emergency cases and could have waited to be seen. If people could have called in first and talked about their problem over the phone, it might have even saved them a trip.

If you have any suggestions or problems with the ANMC Walk-In Clinic or its staff, you can write them down and put them in the hospital suggestion box, or mail them in or see the clinic director personally.

His name and address is: Robert Fortune, MD, Director, Walk-In Clinic, Alaska Medical Center, PO Box 7-741, Anchorage, Alaska 99510. The hospital phone number is 279-6661.