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N.C.'s state of emergency

Report card from physicians gives state average and failing grades

From Vivek Tayal, MD, NCCEP, president-elect of the N.C. College of Emergency Physicians:

This week our state received a report card on the state of the emergency medicine safety net from the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). Overall, North Carolina was rated as a C-minus, which means our state laws and policies are doing a poor job of protecting emergency medicine for everyone.

While North Carolina is doing a very good job supporting efforts in public health and injury prevention (B-plus), it scored only average marks for ensuring access to emergency care (C-minus) and quality and patient safety (C). Our lowest and most troubling score was an F for our medical liability environment.

The North Carolina Chapter of ACEP continues to urge passage of a \$250,000 cap on non-economic damages as well as expert witness rules that require anyone who testifies as an expert witness to be practicing and credentialed in the appropriate specialty. These two reforms have been enacted in other states and have reduced liability rates and frivolous lawsuits while allowing cases with merit to go forward.

North Carolina has also made a strong investment in the future, ranking 13th in the nation for the number of emergency medicine residents and 10th in the nation for the number of residency programs educating emergency physicians to care for our population. Passing liability reform will help ensure that these doctors graduate into a favorable practice environment and do not leave to nearby states -- like Florida -- that have made this commitment.

North Carolina ranks 37th in the nation for the number of emergency departments and 34th in the number of trauma centers. This puts us in the bottom half of the nation. This lowered our access score because as more and more patients seek emergency care each year, the number of departments must match the need. We need to build more emergency rooms and trauma centers.

This report card offers a clinical and critical look at how well North Carolina is doing. And the answer is that we can and need to do better, not just in case of a disaster or disease outbreak, but every day. I hope the residents of North Carolina will visit www.acep.org to review our state's grades and to urge policymakers to support their access to emergency care.

For The Record offers commentaries from various sources. The views are the writer's, and not necessarily those of the Observer editorial board.