

San Francisco News

Psychiatrist improved ER treatment of mentally ill

Winner: Mental health

Health Care Heroes

Jul 27, 2012, 3:00am PDT



Zeller's approach to handling distressed patients broke the mold.

Dr. [Scott Zeller](#) got one of his best ideas for handling psychiatric patients when he flew into Houston in 2005 to see people who were evacuated after Hurricane Katrina. Nearly 30,000 people were bused from New Orleans and packed into the Astrodome, most of them distraught from the disaster.

Some were mentally ill evacuees who had already gone a week without their medications. Without much medicine on hand, doctors had to find other ways to calm these evacuees. They were offered food and asked about their experiences, and gradually patients grew less agitated.

“People had been through the most traumatic experience,” Zeller said. “If you spend a few minutes showing them that you’re there to help ... everything flows from that.”

For Zeller, who wrote a textbook called “Emergency Psychiatry Principles and Practice,” the Astrodome experience was the event that changed his thinking. He thought about how psychiatric patients who came to **Alameda County Medical Center** intoxicated or under the influence of other substances should be treated.

Zeller's experience in Houston was the seed that grew into Project BETA (Best practices in Evaluation and Treatment of Agitation), a program to change how agitated and combative patients are handled in emergency rooms. Many combative mentally ill patients who come into the ER are tackled, restrained on a gurney and given medications. When they're restrained, they could get injured or injure a hospital worker in the process.

A graduate of Northwestern University, Zeller got his training at **University of California, San Francisco** Medical Center before coming to the Alameda County Medical Center in 1988. In 1989, after the Loma Prieta earthquake, and again in 1991 after the Oakland Hills fire, he treated patients who were distraught from their losses. But he's always been interested in how to treat hospitalized, mentally ill patients.

Across the country, there are about 2 million ER visits each year involving agitated patients. Workers can be quick to restrain and sedate them because they can be loud, intoxicated, disruptive and aggressive. But Zeller believes that using verbal de-escalation to handle aggressive patients can help them to calm down, require less medical treatment, and prevent staff and patient injuries.

Many doctors agreed with his approach. In February, a group of researchers led by Zeller published the new guidelines in a six-part series in the Western Journal of Emergency Medicine.

Before the guidelines were issued, emergency workers tested the approach at the Alameda County Medical Center's John George Psychiatric Pavilion in late 2011. Results were astounding.

Zeller found that less-combative ways of handling agitated patients led to a 43 percent decline in having to restrain and isolate them. He compared the period to six months in 2010 before the new practices were in place. Doctors also found that patient attacks on staff went down by 58 percent over the same period.

"You can avoid the use of restraints in the vast majority of cases," Zeller said. "Patients are then more calm and confident. Studies show they get out of the ER much faster as a result."

Although some physicians remain skeptical, many others are now questioning what has been a standard of care across the country, said Dr. [Heather Clague](#), who works with Zeller in psychiatric emergency services. Clague said it has made a big difference at the hospital's John George Psychiatric Pavilion where she works as an attending psychiatrist.

"We've seen a change in our setting," she said. "There's more subtlety and finesse in the way patients are approached."

Zeller's new quest is convincing mental health offices and psychiatrists to list a National Suicide Prevention hotline on their voicemail to help desperate patients and cut unnecessary 911 calls.

"We just want to make sure there's much better access for individuals who are suicidal," Zeller said. "You can try to ... help them understand that this might seem like the end of the world, but things are going to get better."

Winner: Dr. Scott Zeller

Title: Chief of psychiatric emergency services.

Organization: Alameda County Medical Center.

Heroics: Led development of new guidelines for handling agitated emergency room patients that result in fewer injuries and less medical treatment.