

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Increase In Patients With Chikungunya At Juan Luis; Griffith Apologizes For Long ER Wait

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St. Croix residents who visit the Emergency Room at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFL) have been experiencing long wait times, with one patient telling the *VI Consortium* that he spent 12 hours awaiting care. Another patient, a pregnant woman, spent 17 hours in the ER concerned about her status, and although she told hospital staff what she believed was happening to her, the woman said she was not attended to for almost an entire day.

Part of the problem is staff shortages, something hospital CEO Dr. Kendall Griffith says Juan Luis is in the process of changing. He also apologized for long delays in the hospital's ER.

"While it is our pleasure to assist every patient regardless of circumstance or economic background, there can also be delays in our ER when patients present with non-emergent symptoms," Griffith said in a press release. "We recognize that not everyone has a physician to go to during times of medical concern, and a visit to the Emergency Room is sometimes the only option. Given this issue and the additional case load associated with this year's flu season, some patients have recently experienced longer than usual wait times, and we apologize for that inconvenience."

The CEO went on to say that the hospital is working to correct the issue.

"We are working diligently to resolve JFL's shortage of physicians and nurses, and are pursuing every avenue to ensure patient satisfaction," he said. "We are actively recruiting and adopting new systems to fill in the gaps wherever possible. It's a matter of working collaboratively and creatively to resolve the issues. With hospitals nationwide reporting similar shortages, JFL is embracing reform and pursuing innovative policies to find solutions."

Another part of the problem appears to be a rise in viral illnesses and the arrival of flu season. Cases of chikungunya and dengue fever, in particular, have increased in recent times, Griffith says, resulting in an influx of patients to the Emergency Room, straining an already-overworked staff.

"This flu season, viral illnesses are much more prevalent in the Territory," Griffith said. "In addition to critical, emergent care cases, we are seeing many additional patients in the ER due to the flu, as well as higher than usual rates of individuals with chikungunya, dengue fever and other viral illnesses."

Many patients who flood JFL's ER face non-emergency and preventative illnesses, and while the hospital, by law, is mandated to provide care for everyone, JFL's Director of Emergency Department Jacintha Stephen, RN, MSN, advised patients to use island clinics for such illnesses.

"As a matter of due diligence we are focused on providing quality care for each patient, every day," Stephen said. "While we will never turn anyone away from seeking medical care, we encourage residents to sign up with a primary care physician or to utilize on-island clinics for preventative and non-emergency care. This will provide a venue for non-emergent illnesses and will help to eventually decrease the wait times for the more acutely ill patients in the ER."

Stephen also stressed the importance of getting a flu shot to avoid contracting the often severe illness.

"Individuals should ideally get vaccinated annually to ensure that as many people as possible are protected before flu season begins," she said. "It is never too late to get the flu shot, and they are available at clinics and via primary care physicians."