

Autism-Friendly Emergency Department Provides Comfort and Familiarity for Individuals With Autism

While a visit to the Emergency Department can make anyone feel uneasy, it can be especially stressful for individuals with autism. The mere sights, sounds, smells and fast pace can overload the senses, causing extreme anxiety.

To make the hospital experience more comfortable for patients with autism, along with their family members, Community Medical Center has established an “Autism Friendly Emergency Department.”

“We are committed to providing compassion and support to our patients with autism and helping to reduce anxieties involved with coming to the Emergency Department,” says Vikram Varma, M.D., chair, department of emergency medicine and board-certified in emergency medicine. “We want to make sure parents feel comfortable informing us their family member has autism so we can provide an environment that is tailored to meet their needs. Our goal is to streamline the process and fast track patients to a more comfortable setting.”

CMC’s Emergency Department staff - including providers, nursing and support staff – has been working closely with agencies like Parents of Autistic Children (POAC) and Autism Speaks NJ to learn more about autism and how to best communicate and work with patients with autism. Staff education includes awareness about sensory sensitivity, communication and pain threshold, as well as how to interact with patients.

The Emergency Department is equipped with items to make patients feel as comfortable as possible. iPads featuring Augmentative Picture Communication Software allows individuals to work at their communicative level using photographs to express wants and needs. Other support “tools” include sensory boxes filled with various sensory items, as well as items to provide support, comfort and security, including compression vests, blankets and noise reduction ear muffs. Plans also call for adjustable lighting and noise control.

“This is the start of a continual effort,” continues Dr. Varma, “and we hope to receive feedback from our patients and families so we can provide a positive environment and help individuals with autism and parents feel as comfortable as possible.”



Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. To learn more about autism, visit www.poac.net or www.autismspeaks.org.

Dr. Varma (left) checks in with Garett and his dad John during a recent visit to the Emergency Department.