

Emergency room doctors and support staff are an essential part of our health care system. They care for individuals injured in accidents, often saving their lives. They also care for people with illnesses who need care when other health care facilities are closed.

Doctors who staff emergency rooms become highly skilled in treating trauma and emergency care cases. As a result, they are often the most skilled doctors in saving lives. Their skills in treating non-life threatening conditions, however, may not be as well developed.

Medical and Chiropractic schools provide the basic education necessary to care for patients. Practice experience hones those basic skills. Watching how patients respond to various treatments is essential to this process. E.R. doctors often see a patient only once, so they don't have the opportunity to observe how a patient might respond to care. This deprives the E.R. physician from the repeat patient contact that is necessary to develop skills in treating non-emergency conditions.

Recently I had a patient come to me with severe pain in the lower back/hip region. The pain resulted from a fall down a flight of steps. He was concerned that he might have broken a bone in the fall so he wisely went to the E.R. Fortunately no bones were broken, but the doctor diagnosed him with a herniated disc and told him that he might need back surgery. Wanting a second opinion, he came to me.

Herniated discs can cause back pain, but the symptom that is typically associated with a herniated disc is leg pain, especially pain below the knee. This patient wasn't suffering from leg pain. His pain was also focused in the very lower back near the buttock on one side. In this area there is a joint where the pelvis and the spine connect. It is called the sacroiliac joint. This joint is a couple inches below the closest spinal disc. During his examination I found this joint to be tender when pressed. It would not be if the cause of the problem was a herniated disc.

MRI is the best test to confirm a diagnosis of a herniated disc, but practice experience working with thousands of patients with various causes of back pain makes it possible to identify most cases of a herniated disc without an expensive MRI. E.R. doctors often don't have the opportunity to gain this experience.

I have neither the training, nor the experience to perform the miracles that many E.R. doctors perform every day. They also don't have the clinical experience that comes from years of following treatment response that most doctors develop in private practice.

If you suffer from a significant injury or health crisis, the first place that you should go may be the E.R. Once your condition has been treated and stabilized however, it is often wise to follow up with a doctor in private practice who has experience and expertise with the type of condition that you are suffering from.