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TN Trauma Centers Call For Aid

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Motor vehicle crashes represent one of the top ways someone might end up in a Level 1 trauma center. In Tennessee, these specialized centers treated about 18,000 patients last year.

Erlanger admits nearly 3,000 adults and children with traumatic injuries each year. More than half of the adults were involved in motor vehicle crashes. And, 60-percent of those trauma patients were not wearing a seat belt.

Dr. Michael Carr, Medical Director of Pediatric Trauma Services says "some of those injuries are fatal. We see broken necks, children who are paralyzed riding on atv's, we also see injuries to the internal organs."

Erlanger Health System operates 1 of 6 top-tier trauma centers in Tennessee, places equipped with specialists and technology to help the most seriously injured.

Doctors estimate the "focused" care trauma centers provide reduces death from injuries by 12 to 30-percent every year... compared to care in just a standard emergency room. But that care comes at an expense. Erlanger racked up \$17-million in uncompensated care last year, and incurred another \$14-million expense to keep the trauma center open 24/7. Dr. Carr says "although there is a system for trauma care in Tennessee, it's not funded. So each of the hospitals accepts that burden."

Fearing the expense may one day overshadow the benefit, Level 1 trauma centers across Tennessee issue a red alert, calling on the state to start pitching-in. In the last 18 months, 32 trauma centers across the country have closed. Dr. Philip Smith, a trauma surgeon, says "our helicopters range from north Georgia and northern Alabama to western North Carolina up to the I-40 line up to Knoxville and Nashville and a lot of the patients come in without insurance."

Doctors say if Erlanger stopped offering trauma care, seriously injured people would be flown to Nashville or Knoxville, wasting valuable time. Those not able to make the trip, would receive care from a standard emergency room. Dr. Carr says then, "things don't go as fast things don't go as smoothly."

Non-critical patients benefit from trauma centers. High-tech equipment purchased for trauma cases, like the latest C-T scanner, ends up in use to find problems in stroke and heart disease patients.

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