

NYC hospital doesn't take federal payments to treat sick 9/11 first responders

By MICHAEL MCAULIFF

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New York-Presbyterian was ranked New York's best by U.S. News and World Report last month — but with the 20th anniversary of 9/11 fast approaching, there's one group of patients it seldom welcomes through its doors: the police, FDNY members and others who got sick responding to the terror attacks.

That's because [New York-Presbyterian](#) will not sign an agreement with the federal government to accept the fees paid by the feds on behalf of the World Trade Center Health Program. It means people sick with 9/11-related illnesses can't go to the top-ranked hospital in the city without signing an agreement that only covers some of the costs.



New York Presbyterian Lower Manhattan Hospital on William St. in Manhattan (Chase Guttman// New York Daily News)

The gap in medical care is dumbfounding to doctors and some of their patients in the World Trade Center Health Program.

“New York-Presbyterian accepts the Medicare fee schedule, but refuses to accept the World Trade Center Health Program fee schedule,” said Dr. David Prezant, the Fire Department’s top doctor and director of its 9/11 health program, noting that the World Trade Center program pays 15% to 20% higher rates than Medicare.

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“Given that every other hospital in the metropolitan area accepts this fee schedule, this is a very unusual situation,” Prezant explained.

“These are police and fire and communication workers and responders and survivors who deserve equal access to health care,” Prezant said, adding that responders who live near New York-Presbyterian facilities, or who need the specific services that the hospital excels at, such as transplants, don’t have equal access to care.

“We even have hospitals throughout the United States that provide access — equal access to health care — to our patients, when in fact, New York-Presbyterian does not. So that is just unfathomable,” Prezant said.

“They claim that they are willing to make exceptions for someone who has a unique circumstance — and they have, they absolutely have,” Prezant explained.

“But this creates a huge barrier for care because there needs to be a whole bunch of approvals to get that acceptance. And it creates an immense stress — and financial stress — to the patients.”

The doctor explained that every step of the process and every test and doctor has to be approved. If every process, test and doctor visit is not approved, it can lead to a financial disaster for the sick responders.

“An isolated approval for one particular doctor or one particular test means that you’re going to be getting tons of bills from other doctors and other tests that you require during that hospital admission,” Prezant explained. “And they may not be covered because their approval was only for that isolated issue.”

New York-Presbyterian’s system can envelop patients “in a financial mousetrap,” Prezant said.



Firefighters and rescue workers pick through the rubble in search of survivors on Sept. 12, 2001. (Todd Maisel/New York Daily News)

Democrats and Republicans in New York’s congressional delegation — including Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn), Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan, Brooklyn) and Andrew Garbarino (R-L.I.) — sent a letter to the hospital in March complaining that when it does treat 9/11-specific ailments, patients face a bureaucratic nightmare and debt collectors.

“These administrative barriers have resulted in both patient visit cancellations and unresolved service claims,” the lawmakers wrote in the letter obtained by the Daily News. “These unpaid claims then become the financial responsibility

of the WTC Health Program member — a financial burden they are not meant to bear.

“With the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attack this fall, it is long overdue that NYP makes its facilities and services fully and easily accessible to WTC Health Program members,” they wrote.

The hospital’s response to the lawmakers provided no explanation as to why the hospital chain has been unwilling to sign on.

Hospital President Steven Corwin said in late March that 9/11 patients were welcomed.

“No patient has ever been turned away or had difficulties accessing our services,” Corwin told the politicians, adding that the hospital has “dedicated staff to work with the World Trade Center Health Program patients in need of specialty care.”



New York Presbyterian Hospital Columbia University Medical Center on W. 168th St. in Manhattan. (Chase Guttman /Chase Guttman)

A note sent to Maloney's office last month from Anne Sperling, a New York-Presbyterian vice president, said the hospital would deal with the issue by applying to become one of the hospitals known as "Clinical Centers of Excellence" that serve as primary participants in the health program. The program is overseen by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A federal spokesman said the CDC and the institute will not consider the hospital's request to become a Clinical Center for Excellence (CCE) until the spring. The process would then take another three to six months.

Prezant agreed that becoming a CCE would solve the problem, but noted that a hospital that doesn't accept the 9/11 health program's fee schedule cannot be approved.

“Refusal to accept the World Trade Center Health program fee schedule means, by definition, you cannot become a CCE. There is no special fee schedule for the CCEs. The fee schedule is the same,” Prezant explained. “This sounds to me like yet another similar response that we've received since 2011 — ‘Yes, we're going to do something about it.’ But then when you actually see what they do, it amounts to nothing.”

In the meantime, few 9/11 responders have access to the hospital's care.

Jake Lemonda, the president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association said he hopes the hospital will reconsider.

“Moving towards the future, we can only hope that the administration of New York-Presbyterian would acknowledge the sacrifices that not only my members have made, but countless other first responders, and this will be an opportunity for them to give back to the community, and treat those who are truly in need,” Lemonda said.



Jake Lemonda, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association. (Todd Maisel/New York Daily News)

New York-Presbyterian insisted in a statement that the hospital has “been honored to provide” services to first responders, but did not offer an explanation for the decade-old issue.

“Our conversations with the CDC are ongoing, and as soon as the federal government re-opens its application period, we will immediately apply to officially become a designated World Trade Center Health Program Clinical Center of Excellence to further streamline the administrative process, even as we continue to care for these heroes who have sacrificed so much for all of us,” the statement said.

The response left one 9/11 advocate fuming.

“At least they admit it’s a problem,” said Benjamin Chevat, the director of 9/11 Health Watch. “That’s a two-year process, but they could give access to 9/11 responders now by just signing the agreement. ... Every day they deny access is basically another day saying they don’t care about 9/11 responders, and they don’t remember.”