

SPECIAL REPORT Join us for a Code Red Open Forum, Thursday, April 22 at 7:30 p.m. in the Spectator auditorium. This session is free, but you must register in advance. Call our Open Forum line at 905-526-3535 to register

Doctor-shortage data doesn't add up

Doctor shortages, doctor locations and patients who report no family doctor have little correlation.

That's one of the anomalies that has come to light in The Spectator's analysis of hospital data as part of the health mapping project.

Stoney Creek has been identified as the part of Hamilton suffering from the most acute shortage of family physicians.

But The Spectator's analysis shows that Stoney Creek has five of the 10 Hamilton neighbourhoods with the lowest rates of people reporting no family physician.

In fact, there are no Stoney Creek neighbourhoods among the top 65 highest rates of patients reporting no family physician out of Hamilton's 130 neighbourhoods.

The numbers suggest there's little con-

nection between the presence or absence of family doctors in a neighbourhood and whether or not the people in the neighbourhood actually have access to a doctor.

Seven of the 10 neighbourhoods with the lowest rates of people reporting no family physician have no family doctors practising in their neighbourhoods.

At the other extreme, the neighbourhood with the highest percentage of peo-

ple reporting no family physician also has the third-highest rate of family doctors practising per 1,000 people.

The second-most disadvantaged neighbourhood in The Spec's overall rankings has nine family doctors practising within its tiny inner-city area of half a square kilometre. Yet it reports the fourth-highest rate of people who show up in the emergency room reporting no family MD.

neighbourhoods reporting no family physician are also among the top 10 highest rates of people living below the poverty line.

Five of the 10 highest rates of no family physician are also among the top 10 highest rates of emergency room visits.

At the other end of the scale, the 10 neighbourhoods with the lowest rates of emergency room visits are all located in Flamborough and Ancaster, and seven of them are among the top 10 for highest median family incomes.

The irony is that the Hamilton neighbourhoods with the best health outcomes — found in Flamborough and Ancaster, in general — are the ones located farthest from the city's hospitals, while those with the worst health outcomes are the neighbourhoods that sit in the shadow of Hamilton's two inner-city hospitals.



Meet Dr. Agostino Bellissimo.

Dig deeper into the numbers and you'll end up on Bellissimo's doorstep — literally and figuratively. Bellissimo is the chief of emergency medicine at Hamilton's St. Joseph's Healthcare, so he understands the complex collisions that occur every day between health and a host of social and economic factors.

"Emergency departments are the final catch-all for anyone who can't get care elsewhere," said Bellissimo.

How and why a person ends up in an emergency room can sometimes be a chain reaction of factors, few of which may be directly health-related, including lack of transportation, language barriers and lack of a family physician.

Take, for instance, the 10 neighbourhoods with the highest rates of emergency room visits.

Nine of them are either within walking distance or a very short cab ride of Hamilton General Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital or St. Joseph's urgent care centre in the east end.

In general, these neighbourhoods also rank high for reporting no family physician and high rates of poverty.

To Bellissimo, those high rates of ER use are understandable, given the context of what else is happening in those neighbourhoods.

"They're showing up there as a walk-in clinic," he said simply. "That's where they know to go because it's open 24 hours a day."

"It's hard to access care on weekends and after hours, and then if you don't have a family doctor, you can't access care during the day."

"It's frustrating because you don't feel that you're doing anything long-term to help them," Bellissimo added.

"If a patient is coming back that frequently, it means in a sense we — either emerg or society or whatever — have failed in that treatment because coming to an emergency department is not an ideal way to live your life."

Having patients show up in emergency departments rather than doctors' offices is costly in other ways, according to Dr. Walter Owsianik, who has a long-established family practice in Hamilton's North End.

Emergency departments need to be cautious because they aren't familiar with a patient's history, he noted, and caution costs money.

"If you know the patients, it's a lot easier to take care of them," said Owsianik. "When they go to emerg, you have to spend a lot of money and sort of cover your ass to do everything because you don't know them that well."

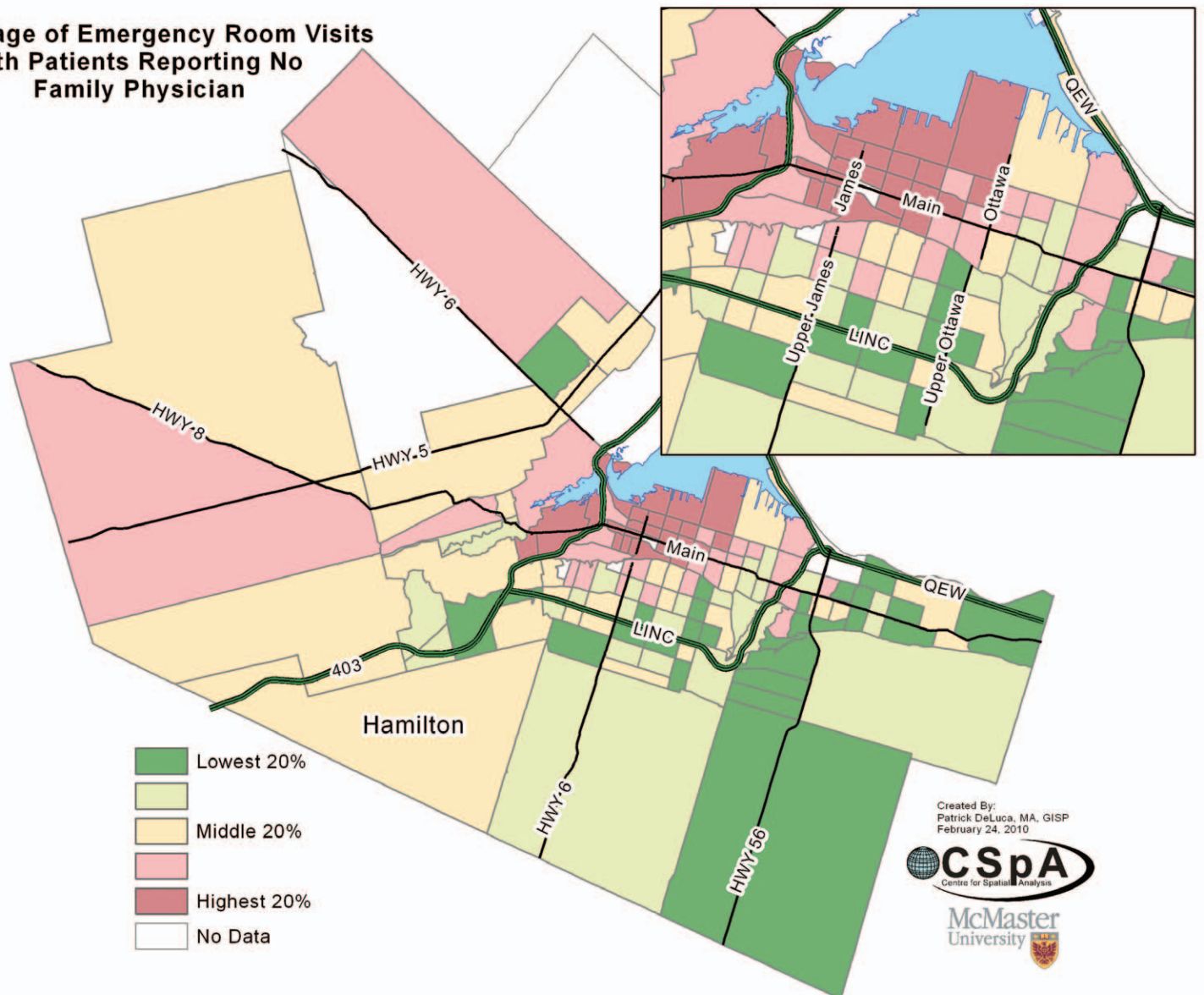
It also becomes clear that reducing the use of health care services — and by extension, lowering costs — means attacking a number of problems that don't appear to have a clear connection to health.

The challenge, said Johnston, the project collaborator, is "reducing the need that people perceive they have to use these services in an open-ended manner."

"But that means there have to be alternatives that are more attractive to them," he said. "They will take the line of least resistance."

"The health care-medical care system has become the last resort."

Percentage of Emergency Room Visits with Patients Reporting No Family Physician



HIGHEST

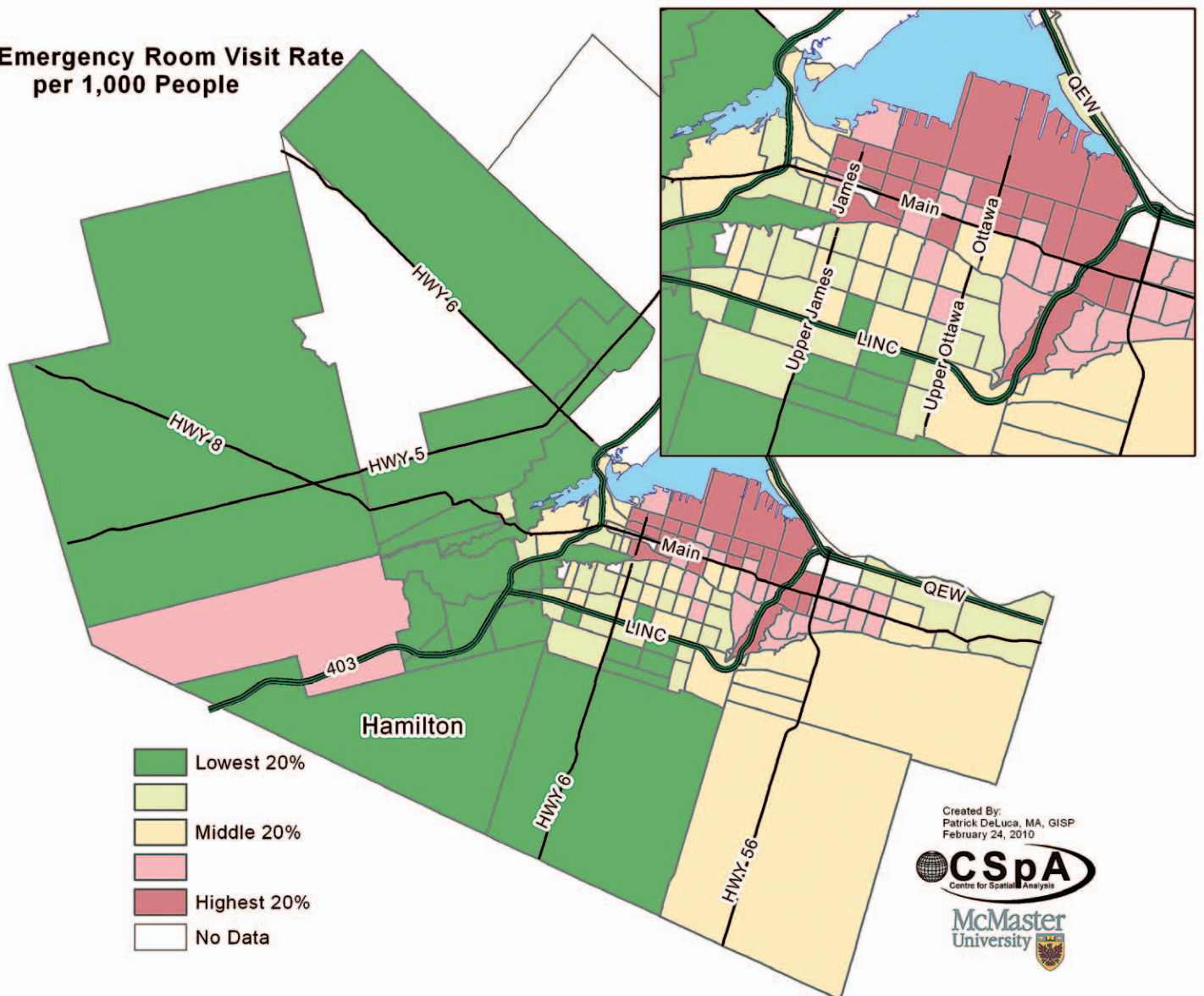
1. 5370045 (Main Street West / Coldwater Creek / Cootes Paradise / Longwood Road South)	21.1%
2. 5370048 (Queen Street North / Cannon Street West / James Street North / King Street West)	20.7%
3. 5370043 (Highway 403 / Longwood Road / Main Street West / west of Ewen Road)	20.3%
4. 5370049 (James Street North / Cannon Street East / Wellington Street North / King Street East)	18.9%
5. 5370064 (Queen Street North / rail line / James Street North / Cannon Street West)	16.3%

LOWEST

1. 5370085.01 (Millen Road / Highway 8 / Jones Road / escarpment)	2.8%
2. 5370026.04 (east of Mount Albion Road / Greenhill Avenue / escarpment)	3.4%
3. 5370005.03 (Upper Ottawa Street / Mohawk Road East / Upper Kenilworth Avenue / Limeridge Road East)	3.5%
4. 5370026.03 (King Street East / east of Quigley Road / Greenhill Avenue / Centennial Parkway)	3.6%
5. 5370080.03 (Upper Mount Albion Road / escarpment / Upper Centennial Parkway / Mud Street)	3.6%

NOTE: Neighbourhoods are identified by their Hamilton census tract number, as defined by Statistics Canada (5370001, for example). For a complete list of Hamilton's census tracts and their geographic boundaries, visit the Code Red project at thespec.com

Total Emergency Room Visit Rate per 1,000 People



HIGHEST

1. 5370068 (Sherman Avenue North / harbourfront / Ottawa Street North / rail line)	1,291
2. 5370067 (Wellington Street North / harbourfront / Sherman Avenue North / rail line)	1,227
3. 5370050 (Wellington Street North / Cannon Street East / Wentworth Street North / Main Street East)	1,179
4. 5370049 (James Street North / Cannon Street East / Wellington Street North / King Street East)	1,178
5. 5370063 (James Street North / rail line / Wellington Street North / Cannon Street East)	1,140

LOWEST

1. 5370142.01 (Middletown Road / Highway 8 / Governors Road / Flamborough border)	97
2. 5370142.02 (Highway 8 / Flamborough border / Gore Road / Middletown Road)	152
3. 5370140.04 (Hamilton Street / Burlington border / Highway 6 / north of Dundas Street)	197
4. 5370140.03 (Concession 5 East / Centre Road / north of Dundas Street / Highway 6)	306
5. 5370144 (Highway 6 / Flamborough-Puslinch Townline / Millborough Line / Concession 5 East / Robson Road / Parkside Drive)	312