An emergency hospital visit often equals long waits and noisy controlled chaos, an atmosphere particularly hard on older patients. But Memorial Regional Hospital South is trying something new: giving seniors an emergency room of their own.

The Hollywood health-care facility is among a small but growing number of hospitals nationwide looking to change the emergency room experience for elders.

Many geriatric emergency departments began as a way for the competitive hospital industry to appeal to the huge baby boom population. Dawn Lipka, Memorial South's emergency services director, said her program originally was designed to market to the retirement condos nearby.

"We like it when they refer to us as 'their' hospital," Lipka said. "We are smaller, quieter and can give them more personalized attention."

But Memorial and other geriatric ER boosters are hoping for other benefits: elder patients who are less likely to be back in the ER within a few weeks because no one properly planned for their care at home. Starting next year, Medicare will financially penalize hospitals that have large numbers of patients who must return to the hospital less than 30 days after discharge, in an effort to curb costs and promote better discharge planning.

"These new ERs are a good example of transforming the health-care system to meet the specialized needs of a population," said Cecilia Rokusek, executive director of education, planning and research for Nova Southeastern University's College of Osteopathic Medicine. "We often have specialized units for pediatrics but we forget about seniors."

People age 65 and older account for about 12 percent of all Americans, but they make up about 25 percent of those visiting emergency rooms, according to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control. There were 74,283 emergency room visits by people 65 and older in Broward County last year and 65,630 in Palm Beach County, according to state statistics. Among the ERs with the highest percentage of senior patients: Boca Raton Regional Hospital, with 36 percent, and Delray Medical Center, with 39 percent.

Some senior-centered emergency departments like the one at Memorial South, which opened two years ago, have specially designed and furnished rooms within an existing ER, or a separate geriatric wing. Other hospitals have gone with aging specialist teams that can better assess an older patient's overall health upon arrival and arrange post-ER care, rather than set aside a specific space in their building.
Either way, those in geriatric medicine say the concept could mean better care for patients and better outcomes for hospitals, even as they are pressured to reduce incidents of infections and falls while trimming costs.

Two women in their 80s arrived within an hour of each other at Memorial South's emergency room one recent Monday morning. The ER is smaller than the one at nearby Memorial Regional Hospital, the healthcare system's largest facility, and quieter.

Hollywood resident Sara Weinstock, 83 and concerned about an ongoing kidney problem, said her family decided in advance to bring her to Memorial South because she would be seen more quickly.

"You get more attention here and get out much faster," agreed Pauline Ferschke, 81, of Hollywood, an asthma patient who came in because she was struggling to breathe.

Their two rooms — among the three set aside for seniors in the 12-bed ER — has beds that are lower, making it easier to get in and out; soft flooring to cushion falls; and doors instead of curtains. A social worker is assigned to the unit full time to assess what older patients will need when they leave, arranging for services such as home care or delivered meals, and do followups after discharge.

Dr. Joseph Ouslander, a researcher studying hospital readmissions at Florida Atlantic University, called geriatric emergency departments "a great quality-of-care idea."

"If I ran a hospital and saw a lot of people in my ER who were elderly, I would do this," said Ouslander, senior associate dean at FAU’s Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine.

Most emergency rooms are concentrating on getting people out quickly, with some posting real-time estimated waiting periods on interstate bulletin boards, Ouslander said. Instead, geriatric emergency departments could focus on evaluating the multiple chronic conditions seniors can have, he said, not just their immediate medical crisis.

So why aren't geriatric emergency departments more common?

Some hospitals are reluctant to commit the space or tie up rooms in their already crowded ERs. Broward Health Imperial Point in Fort Lauderdale wanted to attract seniors living in nearby condos. But the administration decided the facility already was elder-friendly, as it was remodeled 2010.

The hospital created a geriatric team certified through the Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders (NICHE) program, a national initiative aimed at better hospital care for seniors.

Imperial Point is one of three NICHE-certified facilities in Broward and Palm Beach counties, along with Memorial South and Jupiter Medical Center.
The majority of the Imperial Point team's patients come in through the emergency room, said Bonnie Petrie, a licensed clinical social worker who is the hospital's geriatric assessment coordinator. She also reaches out to local seniors living at home or in assisted living centers, gathering emergency contact and other information in advance in case they suddenly must come to the ER.

Rokusek said hospitals also may be shunning the geriatric emergency department concept because they think it will cost too much at a time when Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement, which covers the bulk of elder health care, is decreasing. But that may change if they see the concept reduces the number of readmissions, she said.