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Group says health care attire should stay in hospitals

By Rachel Weaver

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It's common to see someone wearing scrubs outside a hospital, but organizations devoted to stopping the spread of infectious diseases hope to change that.

"It's not what medical professionals bring into the hospitals; it's what they bring out," said Dr. Betsy McCaughey, founder of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths in New York City.

Nurses' uniforms can contain *Clostridium difficile*, or *C. diff*, a common bacteria that can cause violent diarrhea, McCaughey said. The risk is greatest during warm months when caregivers don't wear coats and their uniforms are exposed when they go home or run errands after work, she said.

Dr. Michael Bell of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta said many health care workers are not required to remove their scrubs before leaving work.

"The majority of scrubs currently worn in health care facilities are equivalent to street clothes in terms of infection control. Thus gowns and hand hygiene used as part of standard precautions should be implemented regardless of attire," he said.

McCaughey, former lieutenant governor of New York, said health care providers should consider prohibiting scrubs outside the hospital.

"Nurses and nursing students wear their scrubs home, and they're busy, so they pick up their children and make dinner," McCaughey said. "They're carrying bacteria into their home."

C. diff enters the body through the mouth. Caregivers can carry the spores on their uniforms and contaminate a surface.

"They go into a local deli, sit down on a booth and deposit the spores. Someone else touches that booth and picks up a sandwich and swallows *C. diff*," McCaughey said.

The ideal solution, McCaughey said, would be for hospitals to launder medical garments on-site.

At the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's 20 hospitals, no written policy prevents employees from wearing scrubs outside the hospital, spokeswoman Susan Manko said.

"It's common sense," she said. "You don't want to leave with dirty scrubs on and go and get a cup of coffee."

Employees working in UPMC's operating rooms present identification cards to get clean scrubs, then return them to a laundry service when done.

The scrubs a doctor or nurse wears outside of work are not necessarily dirty, Manko said.

"A lot of time surgeons will go to have lunch, and they'll shower and change into clean

scrubs because they're comfortable," she said. "Or there are times when they're in their offices all day and never see a patient."

West Penn Allegheny Health System's dress code dictates employees who work in clinical areas report to work in street clothes. They are then provided with scrubs that are laundered by the hospital. They change back into their street clothes at the end of the day, spokesman Dan Laurent said.

The workers are prohibited from wearing the scrubs off West Penn property.

Jefferson Regional Medical Center provides clean scrubs daily for staffers working in operating rooms, cardiac catheterization labs and interventional radiology, said spokeswoman Candy Williams. Employees do not wear those scrubs outside of the hospital.

However, Jefferson staff members working in non-invasive areas, including the emergency room, buy and launder their own scrubs, which can be worn to and from work. Physicians at Jefferson are responsible for their lab coats, but they do not wear them into restricted or semi-restricted areas of the invasive procedure departments, Williams said.