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Channel 13 Investigation: Hospital Infections

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According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 90,000 people in the United States die every year from infections they get while in the hospital. That's more than deaths caused by car crashes and homicides combined. Right now, Iowa does not require hospitals to track, nor report infection rates. Channel 13's Sonya Heitshusen and Erin Kiernan investigated the phone calls and e-mails we received about Iowa families who have dealt with the problem, first-hand.

"He always had a joke, he'd break the ice with a joke to share. He was a super dad. We lost a lot when we lost him." Patti Stalzer describes her father as the kind of guy who always put a smile on the faces of those around him.

Glen Brush was born and raised in Iowa, a truck driver, and at 73 had never spent a single day in a hospital. Then early in 2004, Glen Brush ended up in an Arizona hospital because of pneumonia. He and his wife came home to Iowa, and the man who was always so quick with a witty one-liner, became a patient at Marshalltown Medical Center. "Yeah...they just said six weeks. Be patient and things should be ok.", says Stalzer. But things weren't ok. Glen's condition worsened and he was moved to the intensive care unit, where his condition continued to decline.

"Several days later we found out the reason he wasn't getting better was because he had MRSA ... staph infection!", says Stalzer. MRSA is methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus. It's a type of staph infection that does not respond to common antibiotics. It usually occurs among people in hospitals who have weakened immune systems, and it's spread from person to person. According to the CDC, more than two million people each year get an infection in the hospital.

Barb Grabenbauer is head of Marshalltown Medical Center's infection control says, "Everyone receives a basic infection control training." Training starts with doctors and nurses, and extends all the way through the staff, even to housekeepers and volunteers.

Nationally, about one out of every 20 patients gets an infection. At Marshalltown Medical Center, one patient in every 126. According to groups like the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths(RID), people are getting infections they shouldn't be getting, and the non-profit group is leading the charge nationally to make infection rates public.

Betsy McCaughey is the founder of RID. She favors mandatory reporting of infection rates, "If you need to be hospitalized, you should be able to find out which hospital has the worst

infection problem so you can stay away." Right now, only six states have passed laws requiring the collection and reporting of those infection statistics. Those states are Florida, Illinois, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Iowa is not on the list.

Administrators at Marshalltown Medical Center feel so strongly about it's track record, they post it online. La Rae Schelling, the VP of Operations & chief nursing officer at MMC says, "Because people have a right to know where they're going for their healthcare." Representative Pat Murphy, whose wife is a nurse, agrees. "I do think it's something we need ... it's public education, and to make sure Iowa doesn't have a problem that could be resolved by doing these kinds of reports."

Murphy introduced legislation last year that would've required hospitals to publicly post infection rates. The bill was referred to the Human Services Committee, and that's where it stopped.

"I've only had one group state opposition to this...the hospitals.", says Rep. Murphy.

Tom Evans is the chairman of the Iowa Hospital Association, a group that lobbied against Representative Murphy's bill, because members believed it was too simplistic to be effective and would make it impossible to accurately compare one facility to another. Evans points to problems in states like Pennsylvania, where some hospitals worked hard to meet requirements, and others provided only minimal information. Evans says, "The things that make it not compare are...the definitions aren't the same, the methods of comparing the information aren't the same and the resources to do the data collection aren't the same."

The Iowa Hospital Association is now working to create standards for all hospitals to follow for collecting and reporting infection rates. Dr. Evans says the information will be made public. He calls it a new era of transparency and accountability.

Patti Stalzer says something needs to change, "I mean, you can't bring him back, but you don't want it to happen to someone else. I mean, how safe are we in our hospitals?"

The Iowa Hospital Association hopes to have its reporting standards in place this fall. Joining the association is voluntary for hospitals. Marshalltown Medical Center belongs to the group and will take part in its infection reporting.

Join us Tuesday night on the Channel 13 News at 10, when we'll show you how to protect yourself when you have to be admitted to any hospital and how often Iowa hospitals are inspected.

See video clip at: <http://www.whotv.com/Global/story.asp?s=4828790>