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Activist encourages fight against hospital infections

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By Tony Leys, Register Staff Writer

Bacteria are killing tens of thousands of patients in American hospitals, and many medical leaders are slow to take proven steps to battle the problem, a national expert says.

Betsy McCaughey is scheduled to speak Thursday at Des Moines University. The former lieutenant governor of New York is leading a national campaign to wipe out hospital infections.

"We have the knowledge to solve this problem. What we have lacked is the will," McCaughey said.

Federal experts say about 2 million American patients are infected in hospitals each year, and 90,000 of them die.

McCaughey said her group, the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, is careful not to antagonize hospital leaders. "We're coming to town to be helpful, not critical."

McCaughey blames many infections on inadequate hygiene practices by hospital employees and visitors. The problem is compounded by the fact that such bacteria are increasingly tough to defeat with antibiotics. In 1974, her group says, 2 percent of staphylococcus bacteria were resistant to antibiotics. By 2003, that figure was 57 percent and rising.

People lucky enough to survive such infections often have to spend weeks or months in the hospital, and some of them endure multiple surgeries and even amputations.

McCaughey favors mandatory reporting of infection rates. She noted that hospitals often advertise fancy new treatments and devices, but she said consumers would be helped more if they could choose a hospital based on how many of its patients came down with infections. Six states have passed laws requiring such reports. Such a bill was introduced in the Iowa House last spring, but it was opposed by the Iowa Hospital Association and it died without receiving a hearing.

The issue arose in Des Moines last year, after state inspectors found flaws in infection-control practices at Mercy Medical Center. Mercy leaders said that they addressed the flaws and that inspectors from an independent accrediting agency confirmed the problems had been fixed.