

Hospitals must beat the bugs

Be Our Guest

Originally published on September 22, 2005

If you think you may have to go into the hospital soon, keep reading. A new report highlights one of the gravest dangers you'll face - the risk of getting a hospital infection that antibiotics cannot cure.

The report, in the medical journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, raises alarms about the growing number of hospital bugs that can kill you because they are resistant to antibiotics.

How big is your risk? In the U.S., one out of every 20 hospital patients gets an infection. An estimated 103,000 people die from hospital infections every year.

These infections are almost all preventable. They spread rapidly through hospitals because of unclean hands, lax procedures and contaminated equipment. Amazingly, doctors fail to clean their hands 52% of the time before treating a patient. Contaminated equipment - like stethoscopes - is used on one patient after another without being cleaned.

Hospitals are far dirtier places now than they were 50 years ago, before the excessive use of antibiotics replaced careful attention to cleanliness. But overuse of antibiotics is also why many infections can't be cured with commonly used drugs.

Nearly everyone has heard about drug-resistant staph infections. Patients who get them often spend months in the hospital and go through several operations to cut out infected tissue. Now, the new report warns, many other types of infections are becoming drug-resistant.

A few hospitals - in Virginia, Pennsylvania and Iowa - have virtually eradicated these infections. How? Through rigorous hand hygiene, meticulous cleaning of equipment in between patient use and testing incoming hospital patients to isolate those carrying dangerous bacteria. Unfortunately, most hospitals don't take all these precautions.

One recent event shows just how dangerous the situation could become. Forty soldiers were brought to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., with an infection they had contracted in Iraq. The germ raced through the hospital, infecting other patients.

Imagine if the same hospital had to deal with bioterrorism. Without more rigorous infection controls in place, a covertly introduced germ could sweep through a hospital like wildfire. That's why shoddy infection control is also poor homeland security.

**McCaughey is founder of the Committee to
Reduce Infection Deaths (hospitalinfection.org)**

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