

Newsday

Group targets infections

BY DELTHIA RICKS
STAFF WRITER

December 31, 2005

Maureen Daly recalls the last four months of her mother's life as a living nightmare and still cannot believe that surgery for a fractured shoulder led to a hospital-acquired infection that killed her.

On Friday, nearly two years after her mother's death, Daly, who lives in Brooklyn, joined former Lt. Gov. Betsy McCaughey at a news conference in Manhattan to call for stronger federal regulations governing infection-control measures in health care facilities and better methods of teaching infection control to nursing and medical students.

McCaughey, founder of Reduce Infection Deaths, said far too many people enter the nation's hospitals unaware of the dangerous pathogens that lurk on surfaces, in surgical suites, on IV lines and on the uniforms of physicians and nurses. She estimates that treating hospital-acquired infections costs the nation \$30 billion a year.

"Basically, I founded RID to get hospitals to make infection control a top priority . . ." McCaughey said. "Infections that have been nearly eradicated in some countries are raging through American hospitals," she said, calling for a national reporting system.

Caren Catinella of Massapequa, whose 3-year-old daughter died of a hospital infection in 1997, applauded McCaughey's efforts. "People are dying because hospitals are not doing simple, common-sense things, like enforcing handwashing," she said.

Rob Kenny, spokesman for the New York State Department of Health, said about 100 serious hospital-acquired infections are reported annually in the state and that New York will begin a "report card" system in 2008 that will reveal hospitals with the best and worst records on infection control.

Dr. Denise Cardo, director of health care quality at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, estimates that 2 million people are infected in hospitals annually and that 19,000 of them die. The CDC produces and updates recommendations to help keep killer germs at bay. But the CDC is not a regulatory agency and cannot enforce the rules.

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, however, has established guidelines that must be followed for facilities to maintain their licenses. And hospitals have several layers of surveillance to help prevent problems with microbial transmission. Infections nevertheless persist for a variety of reasons.

Cardo said lowering the use of antibiotics is a key strategy. Antibiotic overuse creates situations ripe for "survival of the fittest." Rather than killing all bacteria, the drugs destroy only the weakest. Bacteria continue to grow hardier and can prove fatal when doctors have nothing to offer patients.