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Letters to the Editor

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Dr. Masur's call, in "The Microbial Threat," for new antibiotics to counter the alarming rise in drug-resistant bacteria in our hospitals is important. But the first line of defense against these "superbugs" is rigorous hygiene practiced day after day. Drug-resistant bacteria will not make patients sick if they never get inside the patients' bodies. These superbugs are transmitted from patient to patient on dirty hands, unclean equipment and contaminated uniforms.

Two decades ago, Holland, Denmark and Finland faced similarly soaring rates of drug resistance and brought those rates down below 1%. How? Rigorous hand-hygiene practices; meticulous cleaning of equipment and rooms in-between patient use; identifying the patients carrying drug-resistant bacteria; and taking the isolation precautions needed to prevent these bacteria from spreading to other patients on gloves, uniforms, stethoscopes, wheelchairs and other equipment and furniture. A few hospitals -- too few -- in the U.S. are proving that these precautions work here, too, and have reduced drug-resistant infections up to 90%.

Unfortunately, most hospitals in the U.S. tolerate poor hand hygiene and allow stethoscopes, blood-pressure cuffs, EKG wires and wheelchairs to be used on patient after patient without adequate cleaning. Yes, new antibiotics are needed, but in the meantime, hygiene will protect patients no matter how the bugs morph.

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