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Wipe out hospital infections

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Long Islanders, like most Americans, are paying with their pocketbooks and their lives for poor hygiene in their hospitals. Infections that have been nearly eradicated elsewhere are raging through hospitals. One out of every 20 patients contracts an infection in the hospital. The danger is worsening because, increasingly, these infections cannot be cured with commonly used antibiotics. In 1974, only 2 percent of *Staphylococcus aureus* infections were drug resistant. By 2003, that figure soared to above 57 percent and is still rising.

Denmark, Holland, and Finland once faced similar soaring rates and brought them down below 1 percent. How? Through rigorous enforcement of hand-cleaning rules, meticulous cleaning of equipment and rooms in between patient use, testing all incoming patients to identify those carrying dangerous bacteria such as drug-resistant Staph, and taking precautions to ensure these bacteria are not spread to other patients on gloves, uniforms, stethoscopes, wheelchairs, and other equipment.

A few hospitals in the U.S. are proving these precautions work here too. Hospitals in Pittsburgh, at the University Virginia, and in the Sioux area of Iowa have reduced infections by 85 percent or even 90 percent in pilot programs, using these same precautions.

Can hospitals on Long Island afford to take these precautions? They can't afford not to. Neither can the employers, property taxpayers and insurers on Long Island. Patients who contract hospital infections often have to spend weeks or months extra in the hospital and go through repeated surgeries to cut out infected tissue. Infections are adding \$30 billion to the nation's health tab in unnecessary hospital costs alone, and about \$2 billion of that is paid here in New York. The 5 percent of patients who develop infections wipe about 60 percent of a hospital's operating profits, on average, research suggests.

Hospitals on Long Island also need to respond to this crisis soon, because before long hospital infection will become the next asbestos, that is, the basis for numerous class-action lawsuits.

Improving hospital hygiene saves lives. It will also help save hospitals from financial failure, reduce needless health-care spending, and avert costly litigation. It's time for Long Island hospitals to take the lead in preventing hospital infections. Long Islanders deserve no less.

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