



Bad hospital hygiene costly — in lives, cash

Letters to the Editor

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BY BETSY MCCAUGHEY

Illinois residents, like most Americans, are paying with their lives and their pocketbooks for poor hygiene in their hospitals. Infections are raging through hospitals. The threat has become so bad that one out of every 20 patients contracts an infection in the hospital. Earlier this month, more than 1,000 concerned doctors and nurses met here in Chicago to discuss ways we might curb this deadly problem. As it stands now, however, there's bad news and good news for anyone who has to be hospitalized.

First the bad news: The danger is worsening. Increasingly, hospital infections cannot be cured with commonly used antibiotics. In 1974, only 2 percent of staphylococcus aureus infections (the most common type found in hospitals) were drug-resistant. By 2003, that figure had soared to more than 57 percent and is still rising.

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

Now the good news: These precautions work here, too! A few U.S. hospitals are proving it. The University of Virginia Hospital, the Veterans Hospital in Pittsburgh, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center-Presbyterian Hospital, and a coalition of 29 health care institutions in Iowa have reduced drug-resistant infections by 85 percent or more in pilot programs, using these same precautions.

Recently, hospitals in the Evanston Northwestern Healthcare system have implemented these precautions, too. Why not all hospitals in Illinois?

Many hospital administrators claim they cannot afford to take these precautions. The truth is, they can't afford not to. 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 \$30.5 billion to the nation's health tab in unnecessary hospital costs alone - enough to pay for the Medicare Part D drug benefit. Hospitals are only reimbursed for a small portion of the actual cost of treating a patient's infection. The 5 percent of patients who develop infections wipe out about 60 percent of a hospital's operating profits.

Improving hospital hygiene saves lives. It will also help save hospitals from financial failure and reduce needless health care spending. Let's hope hospital administrators and board members

stopped in to the meetings this month and listened carefully. We have the knowledge to stop these infections. What has been lacking is the will.

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Infection Deaths