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Staph Meets Nurse Betsy

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At holiday time you badly want to like nonprofits, but so many don't seem worth the investment.



We all know them. The foundation with the morphing mission. The one with the agenda as long as Michigan Avenue. The dinner committee that lives to serve the culinary whims of the second wife of its vice chairman. And of course the institutions that suffer from March of Dimes syndrome, outliving by half a century causes for which they were created.

Why can't "nonprofit" be more like "for profit"? Where is the charity equivalent of Research in Motion Ltd., that shop that comes up with the right product at precisely the right moment?

There is one — not RIM, but RID, the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths. Founded by former New York Lieutenant Governor Betsy McCaughey, RID is making headway against a killer that claims more victims than AIDS, auto accidents, and breast cancer combined — the hospital superbug.

Ms. McCaughey and her team have already persuaded hospitals from California to New York to change policies, and thereby reducing infection rates from

methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, the most infamous bug. At the moment, RID is on a campaign to warn against a lesser-known bacterium, *Clostridium difficile*, which attacks patients through their colons and is currently making its way from Britain and Canada.

RID emphasizes a disconcertingly low-tech regimen: washing. Ms. McCaughey, who has a doctorate in constitutional history, takes the approach of a retro scrub nurse — screen patients at hospital admission for bacteria, supervise hospital staff, bleach, clean the stethoscope. Now, when just about everyone has heard of the ghastly MRSA, RID seems more than germane.

Ms. McCaughey has always had a sense of timing. Back in the early 1990s, the conservative press railed at Hillary Clinton, then first lady, in her role as overseer of a health care overhaul plan. The angry approach was so scattershot that conservatives missed their mark. Ms. McCaughey, by contrast, picked her way through the 1,342 pages of Ms. Clinton's committee report. She uncovered what the others were too lazy to dig up: that the Clinton plan would spur employers to abandon cities by creating a new hidden tax. Ms. Clinton has never advocated anything so bold again, not even now, weeks before the primary voting begins.

Ms. McCaughey's subsequent term as lieutenant governor of New York went less smoothly, as did a run for the governor's office. The public focused more on her blonde locks and her divorce from financier Wilbur Ross than Ms. McCaughey's own proposals for the Empire State.

And people began to wonder where Ms. McCaughey was heading when, in 2004 and 2005, she started tossing about weird acronyms at dinner parties. "Antibiotic resistant what?" was the usual reply. The low-tech quality of Ms. McCaughey's message — scrub — didn't sell well in a crowd enamored of research trials.

There also was the yuck factor. Why would Ms. McCaughey, a lady who favors heels over nurse's

Oxfords, pull up her Chanel sleeves and stride into a room full of bedpans?

But she persisted, and people caught on — not only journalist Tina Brown and novelist Erica Jong, but also Nobel Prize-winning bacteriologist Joshua Lederberg, among those who sit on RID's board. Ms. McCaughey was giving voice to what most of us suspected: It can't be good when hospital staff hop the subway in surgical greens.

Poring again through journals, Ms. McCaughey uncovered evidence of what the medical establishment had forgotten: the value of good nursing and a little soapy authority.

When staph moved into prime-time, RID was ready. Ms. McCaughey traveled to at least a dozen hospitals across the country with her clean-and-screen message and spoke at conferences, including one in Budapest and another in Dublin.

Mothers in Texas, where artificial turf has caused abrasions that led to a MRSA epidemic among school football players, these days are studying Ms. McCaughey's guidelines. RID made a presentation in Washington, and the Veterans Affairs Department is implementing new protocols.

RID is also moving to schools with its Ten Step Program for families to prevent staph among children. After the MRSA death of Brooklyn, N.Y., seventh-grader Omar Rivera, New York City public school officials are listening to Betsy. What one takes away from this is that Ms. McCaughey has found her calling. "It turns out I like campaigning against germs better than politicians," she says. She notes that RID got more popular with hospitals when they noticed a clean record increased profitability.

Until recently, RID was mostly a virtual organization, at hospitalinfection.org. Only in August did it get real space, with two rooms in an apartment building.

Ms. McCaughey and a team of two run RID. Ms. McCaughey herself drafted legislation for states to require hospitals to screen for bacteria and disclose infection rates. Benefit dinners, Christmas cards? "We don't do anything like that," Ms. McCaughey says. RID's overhead is 10% of revenue and 12% of budget.

Ms. McCaughey has promised she will close shop when superbugs retreat. Her legislation contains sunset provisions. It all suggests a direction that charities with their own cleaning up to do might follow in 2008.

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