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Germs may be spread in hospitals, study finds

The Boston Globe

By John Lauerman, Bloomberg News | October 10, 2006

Germs that survive treatment by antibiotics may be spread by contaminated hospital beds, even those cleaned to federal standards, researchers said yesterday.

Intensive-care patients were more likely to be infected with drug-resistant germs when they stayed in a bed previously occupied by a patient infected with the germs, said Susan Huang, a Harvard epidemiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

Hospitals worldwide are battling drug-evading germs such as methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, that can cause life-threatening infections. Stringent measures, including more attention to room cleaning, may be needed to control germs in hospitals, Huang said.

"Studies have shown you can culture these bacteria from all sorts of inanimate objects in the healthcare setting," said Huang, who led the study. The research on beds at Brigham and Women's found that the "risk is conferred to someone else," she said. "The risk is small, but it's there."

About 3.9 percent of those who caught MRSA were in a bed where the previous occupant had the same infection.

In comparison, 2.9 percent of patients got germs when the preceding occupant was uninfected.

The difference was more noticeable among patients with vancomycin-resistant enterococci, another germ found in hospitals. Patients caught the germ 4.5 percent of the time when the preceding patient was infected, compared with just 2.8 percent of the time otherwise.

"I would take that information and be concerned that we weren't doing a good enough job cleaning between our patients," Lance Peterson, an infection control specialist for Evanston Northwestern Healthcare in Illinois, said in a telephone interview.

Huang and colleagues analyzed 11,528 patient visits to eight intensive-care units at the hospital. The hospital's room-cleaning procedures include the use of pour bottles rather than sprays for cleaning solutions, according to the study, published yesterday in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

The infection risk "suggests that national recommendations for terminal room cleaning do not completely prevent transmission," the authors said in the study.

Treating such infections might cost hospitals more than \$20 billion annually, Peterson said. ■

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