Hospitals Seeing More Superbug-Fighting Robots

U.S. Hospitals are turning to "Star Wars" robots and other new innovations to combat an increasingly common problem: "superbugs."

In U.S. hospitals, an estimated 1 in 20 patients pick up infections they didn't have when they arrived, some caused by dangerous `superbugs' that are hard to treat.

The rise of these superbugs, along with increased pressure from the government and insurers, is driving hospitals to try all sorts of new approaches to stop their spread: "Star Wars" machines that emit ultraviolet light or hydrogen peroxide vapors, and germ-resistant copper bed rails, call buttons and IV poles. Also, antimicrobial linens, curtains and wall paint.

While these products can help get a room clean, their true impact is still debatable. There is no widely-accepted evidence that these inventions have prevented infections or deaths.

Meanwhile, insurers are pushing hospitals to do a better job and the government's Medicare program has moved to stop paying bills for certain infections caught in the hospital.

"We're seeing a culture change" in hospitals, said Jennie Mayfield, who tracks infections at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis.

Those hospital infections are tied to an estimated 100,000 deaths each year and add as much as $30 billion a year in medical costs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The agency last month sounded an alarm about a "nightmare bacteria" resistant to one class of antibiotics. That kind is still rare but it showed up last year in at least 200 hospitals.

Hospitals started paying attention to infection control in the late 1880s, when mounting evidence showed unsanitary conditions were hurting patients. Hospital hygiene has been a concern ever since, with a renewed emphasis triggered by the emergence a decade ago of a nasty strain of intestinal bug called Clostridium difficile, or C-diff.

The diarrhea-causing C-diff is now linked to 14,000 U.S. deaths annually. That's been the catalyst for the growing focus on infection control, said Mayfield, who is also president-elect of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology.

C-diff is easier to treat than some other hospital superbugs, like methicillin-resistant staph, or MRSA, but it's particularly difficult to clean away. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers don't work and C-diff can persist on hospital room surfaces for days. The CDC recommends hospital staff clean their hands rigorously with soap and water -

or better yet, wear gloves. And rooms should be cleaned intensively with bleach, the CDC says.

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