Study: To Stop MRSA's Spread, Decontaminate All ICU Patients

Infections acquired from healthcare facilities are a public health priority for U.S. officials, given about one out of every 20 hospital patients will contract an infection they didn't come in with.

Such so-called health care-associated infections (HAIs) kill tens of thousands of people each year and drive up healthcare costs in the process.

There's also evidence some of the infections are developing resistance to the strongest antibiotics hospitals have. Hospitals have tried to combat the spread of the infections and drug-resistant "superbugs" by implementing prevention programs, developing germ-resistant hospital equipment, or even turning to robots with ultraviolet sensors for cleaning.

Now, a large study suggests an effective approach to stop the spread of potentially deadly hospital infections like methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is decontaminating every patient in intensive care.

MRSA can live on the skin or in the nose without causing symptoms but can be life-threatening when it reaches the bloodstream or vital organs. It is especially dangerous because it is resistant to many antibiotics.

About a decade ago, hospital-linked invasive MRSA infections sickened more than 90,000 people nationwide each year, leading to roughly 20,000 deaths. As hospitals improved cleanliness through such measures as better hand-washing and isolating carriers of deadly germs, those numbers dropped by about a third, with fewer than 10,000 deaths in 2011, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

For the study, published May 29 in the New England Journal of Medicine, doctors enlisted more than 70,000 ICU patients from more than 40 U.S. hospitals, who were randomly assigned to get one of three treatments: MRSA screening and isolation; screening, isolation and decontamination of MRSA carriers only; and universal decontamination without screening.

The study targeted ICU patients, who tend to be older, sicker, weaker and most likely to be infected with dangerous bacteria, including drug-resistant staph germs like MRSA.

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