Winning The MRSA Battle In Hospitals

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Treating every single patient who enters an intensive care unit with special disinfectant soaps and ointments drastically reduces the spread of the drug-resistant bacteria MRSA and cuts the rate of bloodstream infections in hospitals, a new study shows.

By adopting a universal strategy of disinfecting the most vulnerable patients, hospitals could make substantially more progress against serious infections that are contracted in health care settings, the researchers say. Most hospitals currently use a more limited approach, which involves screening intensive care patients and then isolating those known to harbor MRSA, or methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus.

The study found that the universal strategy lowered bloodstream infections among intensive care patients by nearly 50 percent. The research, published on Wednesday in The New England Journal of Medicine, involved about 75,000 patients in 43 hospitals around the country, making it the largest study of the subject to date.

“I believe that this approach should be used in many if not most hospitals as a very effective way to get us closer and closer to zero hospital-associated infections,” said Dr. Susan S. Huang, the lead author of the study and an associate professor at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine. “I think with this amount of reduction, it should push us toward action.”

In a statement, Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which helped finance the study, said the agency was “working to determine how the findings should inform C.D.C. infection prevention recommendations.”

Nationwide, nearly two million people contract infections in hospitals every year, and roughly 100,000 die from them. MRSA, an increasingly common infection, has become a particular focus for health care officials because it is so virulent and difficult to treat.

Many hospitals screen for the bacteria in their most vulnerable patients, those in intensive care units, by taking swabs of their nasal cavities, where MRSA is most likely to congregate. At least eight states mandate such screenings.

Patients who are found to harbor MRSA in their nostrils or anywhere on their bodies are usually placed in isolation to prevent it from spreading to others. But the patients harboring the bacteria still have a high likelihood of developing a severe infection.

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