New Hampshire Hospital-Acquired Infections Hold Steady

Holly Ramer, Associated Press

New Hampshire's hospital-acquired infection rate has been holding steady in recent years, and public health officials say the numbers are encouraging.

New Hampshire's 31 hospitals have been required since 2009 to provide data on patients who develop infections after heart, colon and knee surgeries or through central lines — catheters inserted in blood vessels near the heart or another major vessel. The latest report, released Tuesday, covers 2011, and shows a total of 110 infections. The total was similar in 2010, but the new figure is 40 percent lower than expected based on national data.

Four hospitals had fewer infections than expected — Catholic Medical Center and Elliot Hospital in Manchester, Concord Hospital and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon. Sixteen had infection rates that were in line with national data, while others were not included in the comparisons because they were expected to have less than one infection.

The report also looks at how well hospitals adhere to infection prevention practices, including following certain procedures for inserting central lines and encouraging staff to get vaccinated against influenza. Compared to 2010, hospitals maintained high compliance rates or improved their efforts overall.

Dr. Jose Montero, the state's public health director, said he is encouraged by the data, which he hopes will be used to help improve health care delivery.

"I know hospitals work hard every day to deliver quality care to their patients, but systems and people are not perfect," he said.

The next report, covering 2012, will provide more data, including information on urinary tract infections associated with catheters in pediatric and adult intensive care units, as well as surgical site infections following hysterectomy procedures.

While the 2010 report was released eight months after the end of that year, Tuesday's report took nearly twice as long to be released, in large part because state public health officials were busy investigating the hepatitis C outbreak at Exeter Hospital.

David Kwiatkowski, a former technician in the hospital's cardiac catheterization lab, was arrested last summer and charged with stealing painkillers and replacing them with syringes tainted with his own blood. Thirty-two people in New Hampshire have been diagnosed with the same strain of hepatitis C carried by Kwiatkowski, who has pleaded not guilty to 14 federal drug charges and is expected to go to trial next fall.

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