

Hospital infections kill 103,000 in one year

Hospitals are supposed to be places to go to get medical help when we're sick. However, a recent investigative report in the *Chicago Tribune* revealed that, in the year 2000 alone, some 103,000 deaths were linked to infections acquired in hospital themselves -- making them one of the most dangerous places we can go.

Although the government has never denied the extent of the problem, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had calculated that 90,000 people died in 2000 because of infections they acquired while in the hospital -- 14% far below the number arrived at by the *Tribune* researchers. So widespread is the problem that hospital-acquired infection is ranked as the fourth leading cause of death in the United States behind heart disease, cancer and strokes.

According to Michael J. Berens, *Tribune* staff reporter, "A hidden epidemic of life-threatening infections is contaminating America's hospitals, needlessly killing tens of thousands of patients each year." What's more, the article noted, nearly three-quarters of the deadly infections -- or about 75,000 -- were preventable, the result of unsanitary facilities, germ-laden instruments, unwashed hands and other lapses.

The article also quoted Dr. Barry Farr, a leading infection-control expert and president of the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America. "The number of people needlessly killed by hospital infections is unbelievable, but the public doesn't know anything about it," he said. "For years, we've just been quietly bundling the bodies of patients off to the morgue while infection rates get higher and higher."

As an example of the problem, the report highlighted a 1998 case in Chicago, where several workers tended without washing their hands -- even though they were ill. As a result, eight children died of infection. "The flulike outbreak, which the city of Chicago never revealed to the public, was halted weeks later after three dozen sick health-care workers were ordered to stay home," the report revealed.

The *Tribune* conducted extensive research for the report, analyzing records gathered among 75 federal and state agencies, as well as internal hospital files, patient databases and court cases around the nation. The result is the first comprehensive analysis of preventable patient deaths linked to infections within 5,810 hospitals nationally, it noted.

Among the other findings was that serious violations of infection-control standards occurred in the vast majority of hospitals nationally. "Since 1995, more than 75% of all hospitals have been cited for significant cleanliness and sanitation violations," the paper reported.

"Can you imagine the medical community outcry if even a single doctor died from germs because of a failure to wash hands?," asked Mark Bruley, a forensic investigator who studies hospital conditions for ECRI, a non-profit laboratory near Philadelphia. "Health-care workers aren't the ones getting hurt. Because they don't always see the outcome, they are blind to problems."

SOURCE: "Infection epidemic carves deadly path; Poor hygiene, overwhelmed workers contribute to thousands of deaths," by Michael J. Berens, *Chicago Tribune*, Jul 21, 2002.

