



The Most Dangerous Place to Be if You're Sick

When Leroy Rickabaugh had surgery to remove a bladder tumor at Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines, Iowa, last October, he expected to be in the hospital for just a few days.

Instead, he ended up staying for nearly three weeks after he contracted a bacterial infection that also hit several other patients on his ward. "I didn't get more seriously sick," Rickabaugh, 74, says, "but they wouldn't let me out until it cleared up."

In a way, Rickabaugh was lucky. Of the 2 million or so Americans each year who contract infections while in the hospital, about 90,000 die because of them. Hospital infections, in fact, are the nation's sixth-leading cause of death.

Health care and consumer activists have been pushing for laws that would require hospitals to publicly disclose their infection statistics, in the hope of pressuring them into adopting more effective anti-infection measures. So far they've scored victories in five states: Florida, Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Virginia. About 30 other states are considering similar legislation.

"It's a problem begging for attention, one that costs a lot of lives and money," says Lisa McGiffert, director of the Stop Hospital Infection Project for Consumers Union. "Clearly, hospitals aren't doing all that they can."

Now, with efforts in the states accelerating, comes a push for a nationwide standard.

"We have an information shortage about hospital infections," says Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., president of the National Quality Forum, a Washington-based nonprofit organization. "But if we have 50 different standards for measuring the problem, we'll have information chaos."

First the bad news: About 90,000 Americans die each year from infections they contract while in the hospital.

Most infection-fighting measures aren't new, but experts say they're not consistently followed. Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis proved in 1847 that the transmission of infections in hospitals could be reduced by hand washing. But many doctors, nurses and other staff members still do not wash their hands between patients. Another simple but often overlooked precaution: ensuring that surgery patients receive the correct antibiotic up to one hour before incisions are made.

"Doctors and nurses get so caught up in their work that they don't even realize how far their own practices fall short, until they see the data out there," says David Schulke of the Washington-based American Health Quality Association. "We need to get that data to them."

—Patrick J. Kiger