

Subject: for web
From: JEANREXFORD@aol.com
Date: Fri, 19 Oct 2007 07:30:11 EDT
To: bill@harveymalis.com

courant.com/news/opinion/editorials/hc-badgerms.artoct19,0,4324664.story

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Declare War On Bacteria

October 19, 2007

It's hard enough to be ill and maybe need surgery. But imagine seeking medical help only to get sicker.

That is the picture emerging from a federal study that shows the deadly bacteria MRSA, methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, may be twice as common as previously thought. The bacteria affects nearly 95,000 people annually in the U.S. and kills about 19,000.

They are exposed in settings such as hospitals, nursing homes and schools. About 85 percent of invasive infections are associated with health care settings, but infections in the community at large have increased. In Connecticut, there were 38 such cases reported in 2001 and 99 in 2006, about 10 percent of the total.

Just last week, the germ, which doesn't respond to common antibiotics, killed a 17-year-old Virginia high school student. In all, it is responsible for more deaths than AIDS, Parkinson's, emphysema or homicide each year.

No wonder an editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association, responding to the study, called the numbers astounding.

There's no reason to panic. The bacteria is not often deadly in otherwise healthy people. A Weston High School student's confirmed case this week did not make him seriously ill or prompt alarm from public health officials.

But what's particularly frustrating about the findings, compiled from actual cases in Connecticut and eight other states, is that MRSA is theoretically preventable. The bacteria live on the skin and in the noses of carriers. Some health care settings have reduced the number of cases drastically by screening patients for the bacteria, isolating them, sterilizing equipment and making sure staff and medical personnel wash their hands frequently, especially between patients.

This study gives those measures even more urgency. People who need surgery or treatment for open wounds shouldn't have to fear that the cure could be life-threatening.

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Jean Rexford
203 247 5757

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