



Posted on Sat, Nov. 29, 2008

Prevention of MRSA stressed at conference

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A bug called MRSA turned Orvil Hazelton's routine knee replacement into a nightmare that ended only after surgeons amputated his left leg just above the knee.

It was the one way they could rid Hazelton's body of MRSA, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, a potentially deadly bacterial infection that defies many antibiotics and plagues hospitals across Kentucky and the nation.

"We need to stress all the rules about washing and using gloves in hospitals, because that's how these things are spread," said Hazelton, who spoke at a recent health care conference in Lexington.

The conference focused on MRSA and other infections that increasing numbers of patients acquire in the course of receiving care in hospitals and other health facilities. Since health care facilities have many patients with IVs and open wounds, they are primary places for MRSA and other drug-resistant germs to strike.

Some states are beginning to require hospitals to publicly report their rates of MRSA and other hospital-acquired infections.

Dr. Kevin Kavanagh, a Somerset physician and planner of the Conference for Healthcare Transparency & Patient Advocacy held recently in Lexington, contends that if information on health care-acquired infections were widely available, Kentucky patients could use it when selecting where to get their health care. Kentucky, however, does not require hospitals to report that data.

(You can learn more about the conference, and hear presentations by Orvil Hazelton and others by going to www.healthwatchusa.org.)

While the conference featured several academic presentations on the issues surrounding health care-acquired infections, Hazelton was the only speaker who had lived through such an experience.

Hazelton, who lives in Lexington, said he began having problems in 2002, after what should have been a straightforward knee replacement surgery. Pain and swelling in his knee was diagnosed as a staph infection, but at first there was not great cause for concern. Eventually, however, doctors identified the infection as MRSA.

Various treatment approaches failed to stem the infection, and in 2006 doctors amputated Hazelton's leg. He now has a prosthetic leg, but he says he still has challenges.

"There are things I still can't do," he said.

Kavanagh says that although Hazelton's case is severe, such drug-resistant infections are increasingly common across the country and in Kentucky.

"I think that certainly there is a great deal of public concern and a belief that the numbers of these infections is significant," he said. "But no one knows, because nobody is really tracking this."

State health officials say generally that there is no specific public health initiative, such as immunizations, that could prevent such infections. They also say that it would be expensive to mandate a reporting system.

Kavanagh counters that Kentucky could save enough money to finance such a system by directing its Medicaid program to stop reimbursing hospitals and other facilities for so-called medical "never events." The term refers to medical errors, such as surgeries performed on the wrong limb or medical equipment left in patients' bodies after operations.

Medicare announced in the fall that it would no longer reimburse hospitals for procedures in which such never events occur. Kavanagh argues that if Kentucky's Medicaid program adopted a similar policy, the savings could be used to establish a statewide program to report hospital-acquired infections.

Meanwhile, Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports magazine, is pushing ahead with its own efforts to persuade states to require hospital reporting of MRSA and other hospital-acquired infections. Lisa McGriffert, who directs the campaign, says 25 states so far have adopted legislation requiring some level of reporting.

McGriffert contends that requiring hospitals to report their infection rates would challenge the institutions to improve their rates and provide the public with useful information when planning where to go for care.

She estimates that up to 95,000 people developed MRSA infections in 2005.

"These are real people who have been harmed, and we need to do everything we can to stop it," she said.

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