Easy ways to decrease U.S. hospital infections

By ACSH Staff — February 2, 2011

A simple five-point check list implemented by hospital staff to ensure strict hygiene standards reduced intensive care unit (ICU) death rates by ten percent, a new study published in BMJ shows. A team of researchers from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore looked at the records of 1.3 million patients 65 or older and compared ICU death rates in Michigan, where the checklist program was implemented, to ICU death rates from surrounding states. Hospital infections caused by contamination of central venous lines leading to bloodstream infections — septicemia — affect approximately 80,000 patients annually, and 31,000 of them die. Thus, a ten percent decrease in death rate is great news.

“Mortality due to septicemia is very high, and since it is common for people in the ICU to be given a central line, and to be quite ill from other conditions, the last thing they need is to get an infection from it,” says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. “When I was in practice, we used to write the date when a central line was put in and someone would change it after two days to avoid infection, but that is no longer the rule. Now central lines aren’t changed unless there are clinical signs of an infection.”

The five-point hygiene checklist consisted of hand washing; using a cap, gown, and mask; cleaning the patient’s skin with a disinfectant; avoiding placing catheters near the groin; and removing unnecessary catheters.

“These are simple steps that can be taken to acquire beneficial results as long as they are assiduously and systematically practiced,” adds Dr. Ross.