Scrubs and public health: What not to wear outside the hospital

By ACSH Staff — February 23, 2011

Hospital employees — including doctors, nurses and others — who wear their scrubs or gowns outside of work may unknowingly pose a public health threat, Dr. Betsy McCaughey told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review Monday [1].

Founder of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths (RID) and Chairperson of ACSH, Dr. McCaughey emphasizes that the issue of wearing scrubs in public places is not a matter of what “medical professionals bring into the hospitals; it’s what they bring out.” The uniforms could contain pathogens commonly circulating in hospitals such as Clostridium difficile, methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) that could infect non-patients. Many hospitals, however, do not have written policies mandating health care workers to remove their scrubs before exiting the work place.

Dr. McCaughey’s RID Committee has been aggressively promoting the concept of reducing hospital-acquired, often preventable yet deadly infections by getting all staff to adhere to a simple 15-step protocol requiring careful attention to hygienic practices. Hospitals which have adopted her organizations precepts have found significant reductions in infection rates — with concomitant benefits for both health and the hospitals’ bottom lines.

While ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross agrees that health care workers should not be allowed to wear scrubs in public spaces, he believes that what they bring into the hospital — community-acquired organisms — should also be addressed. “Why can’t we have a rule saying you can’t wear hospital attire outside the hospital, period? It is very plausible that cross-contamination from clothing occurs in both directions. These workers can bring harmful bacteria from the subway or bus into the hospital through their scrubs, too, and needlessly expose immuno-compromised patients to disease.”