Making a diff against C diff

By ACSH Staff — March 8, 2012

Even as the public is becoming more aware of the risks of hospital-acquired infections, and health providers are working to improve sanitary practices to prevent disease transmission, there is still a worrying trend: Infections with C. difficile (Clostridium difficile) are actually on the rise. C. difficile is a bacterial infection that can cause severe diarrhea and even death. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, over the past 10 years, the number of Americans who have been hospitalized for C. difficile infections has tripled. Even worse, over this same time period, the number of people dying from the infection has quadrupled. Currently, about 14,000 Americans die every year from C. difficile infection.

Although it had been thought that most C. difficile infections are contracted in the hospital setting, in fact about half of those who harbor C. difficile were already infected before they arrived at the hospital. Patients who are taking antibiotics long-term or in combination are particularly susceptible to this infection the antibiotics kill off beneficial bacteria, which allows the C. difficile to proliferate.

Yet hospitals are still a key location to target in reducing the toll of C. difficile. Health care providers, whether they work in a hospital, a nursing home, or a clinic, need to work to end the transmission of C. difficile, says the CDC. Important measures include reducing the overprescription of antibiotics, isolating patients who have been diagnosed with C. difficile infection, sterilizing all surfaces a patient comes into contact with, and being sure that health workers wear gloves and gowns and wash their hands regularly. Unfortunately, adds ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom, it will take a new family of antibiotics to further get a handle on C. difficile infections and deaths, but the amount of ongoing research in this area is woefully inadequate.

RID (the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths), founded and led by Dr. Betsy McCaughey, an ACSH trustee, works to encourage modifications in health care settings and in policy that help to reduce hospital-acquired infections, such as C. difficile.