Hospital infections trending downward, according to the CDC

By ACSH Staff — March 27, 2014

The Centers for Disease Control and New England Journal of Medicine reported on Wednesday [1] a promising decline in hospital infections. The study surveyed 183 hospitals in 2011, including 648,000 patients. That year there were 722,000 infections, much fewer than previous estimates, which had projected 1.7 million cases per year. At the rate of infection calculated from the 2011 data, about one in 25 patients have at least one hospital-associated infection.

Despite the positive trajectory, health officials emphasize we must not overlook the four percent of patients affected by hospital-associated infections in acute care hospitals. Deputy Director of the CDC’s Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion, Dr. Michael Bell asserts [2], The remaining 4% rate of infection shows that the issue is not minor. Every number you see in the reports is a person. Indeed, each number is a person with a preventable illness that can easily escalate into a fatal and life threatening condition. About 75,000 infection cases reported in 2011 resulted in death.

Unfortunately, prevention tactics are not effectively executed, as Dr. Betsy McCaughey, chairman of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths (RID Committee), comments Shockingly, the CDC’s list of actions to curb these infections does not include better cleaning of hospitals. Research shows that unclean equipment and inadequately cleaned hospital surfaces are the major cause of these infections, allowing bacteria to be transmitted from patient to patient | We have the knowledge and technology to give patients a clean hospital environment. What is lacking is the will. (Dr. McCaughey, a former ACSH trustee and current friend, has been campaigning on this subject for over a decade).
Among the four percent of patients developing hospital infections, the most common types of hospital-associated infections were determined to be pneumonia, surgical site infections, and gastrointestinal infections. In addition, Clostridium difficile was the most prevalent pathogen among surveyed acute care hospitals. Dr. McCaughey adds, C. difficile infections are caused by fecal material contaminating the hospital environment and therefore can be averted with proper intervention.

Thus, while the decline in hospital infections shows progress in medical care, much work is yet to be done. In fact, recent improvements need to be taken with a grain of salt, as Dr. Bell points out: ...that other forces were at work, such as changes in the country’s medical landscape. For example, according to a NYTimes article, [3] More than 60 percent of operations are performed outside of hospitals, in outpatient facilities like orthopedic surgery centers, and much of the care that used to happen in hospital wards is shifting to nursing homes. Therefore, health care officials and workers must continue to work together to implement the preventive solutions available today.