Experts question hospital methods of reducing infections

By ACSH Staff — August 21, 2014

According to a recent report [1] from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), experts are questioning the utility of current hospital practices designed to fight the spread of MRSA methicillin-resistant Staphlococcus aureus, also known as a superbug. This bacterium is resistant to many antibiotics, and can cause serious infections in patients whose health is already compromised. While it may be carried on the skin of healthy persons, and even on pets, it is unlikely to harm if there are no open wounds through which it can enter the body.

Currently, hospitals use several means to thwart the spread of MRSA among their patients. These include:

- patient isolation
- thorough hand-washing
- masks, gloves and gowns for attending healthcare workers and visitors
- screening patients for MRSA before admission.

While these actions make sense, according to Professor Gerd Fatkenheuer, from the University Hospital Cologne, Germany, they weren’t properly assessed in well-designed studies. According to an editorial [2] in The Lancet, he and colleagues thought that hospitals may be combining methods that are ineffective or harmful with those that are useful. One example given is the practice of isolating patients infected with MRSA, which they thought could lead to significant depression and increase anxiety. They did emphasize that good hand-washing procedures are backed up by sound evidence.

It is clear that whether or not hospitals practices are totally appropriate, something seems to be working, as the number of MRSA cases in England dropped from over 4,000 cases in 2006-08 to about 860 in 2013-14. However, in their editorial, the authors stated The key question now is
whether scarce resources should focus on screening for one particular pathogen, or assume a broader approach focusing on reducing all hospital-acquired infections, not just MRSA.

Former ACSH trustee Dr. Betsy McCaughey, who founded the organization RID [3] (Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths) presents information on the appropriate methods to deal with MRSA in hospitals in particular she notes [4] that nearly three quarters of patients' rooms are contaminated with MRSA. Thus environmental contamination is an important part of the equation.