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Urge hospitals to reduce infection rates

By Carolyn Dennis

At issue | July 25 commentary by Dr. Kevin Kavanagh "Physician, wash thy hands: Ky. fails to combat hospital infections"

Have you have tried telling a story about your latest frustration as an airline customer? Lost luggage. A long delay on the ground. A meal that consisted of five peanuts The indignity of a search.

No matter the topic, after you finish be prepared to get a horror story back from your listener. Everybody has had a bad day at the airport.

The same thing happens if you tell a story about getting an infection at the hospital. We all know someone who went in for a minor procedure expected to require a day or two in the hospital and instead required a week or longer because of a "hospital acquired infection" or HAI.

The difference is that while a lost-luggage story is about inconvenience, the other is about a life-threatening event.

What's more, HAIs are common enough in all health-care settings, not just hospitals, to warrant a name change. They are now recognized by the Centers for Disease Control as "health care associated infections." The name change may seem innocuous, or perhaps a bit defensive on the part of hospitals sensitive to public relations. But on a deeper level, it's disturbing that rather than defeat the infection threat, we've renamed it to capture its expanding footprint.

So, kudos to Dr. Kevin Kavanagh for his July 25 commentary, in which he urges a public right to know the rates of these life-threatening infections that afflict almost 2 million patients and kill approximately 100,000 people annually, more than diabetes or influenza and pneumonia, according to CDC statistics.

However, we have very little data in Kentucky because hospitals are not required to report this information to the public. This is a serious issue worthy of the attention of citizens all over the commonwealth, so the Friedell Committee on Health System Transformation is focusing on the problem.

We believe communities should know the infection rates of their hometown hospitals, as well as what progress those hospitals are making in addressing this concern. It is community members who acquire these infections and who directly or indirectly pay for the additional care needed, and sometimes even die from them.

While it's easy to understand why hospitals might be reluctant to disclose this information, making such data available can only be helpful in the long run, resulting in improved patient care and community collaboration. The CDC has stated: "The tracking and reporting of healthcare associated infections is an important step toward health care transparency," a major goal of health system reform.

In the United States, several states have implemented public reporting laws dealing with HAI. Not Kentucky. Some Kentucky hospitals already understand the importance of the issue.

Norton Healthcare, for example, publishes its data at <http://www.nortonhealthcare.com>, as does St. Joseph Health System, <http://www.sjhlex.org/body>. Most hospitals are dealing with it internally, but not making data available to the public.

The Kentucky Hospital Association has indicated a strong interest in this topic and began training in July for hospitals which volunteered for the project. Beginning in October 2012, Medicare payments to hospitals will be tied to how well they protect patients from these infections and the quality of their patient care.

While those two steps almost certainly will persuade hospitals and other health facilities to implement protocols to prevent these potentially deadly infections, public awareness and demand for accountability can hasten the process, thereby saving much unnecessary loss of life and unneeded expense.

The Friedell Committee is asking our members to request that hospitals in their communities complete a survey

indicating how they track HAI internally, and what steps they are taking to reduce infections. We're not asking for their data, but we'd like to know if they're considering making it available to the public, and what protocols they have in place to protect the public.

Why is transparency and reporting on HAI so important?

Because the unabated presence of HAIs requires community awareness and involvement to assure the problem is a priority and that it gets solved. And it can be solved. Sometimes simple steps make remarkable differences in HAI rates — things like improved handwashing or post-op cleanup procedures.

HAIs are a hospital problem, but it's a community problem, too. Hospitals and their communities must partner to assure accountability and solutions.

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