

Local hospitals determined to keep sick patients from getting sicker

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The threat of untreatable infections has long loomed over the health care system, but the day has finally arrived when doctors routinely see patients with infections that are resistant to one or more antibiotics. As drug-resistant bacteria become more common, it is increasingly important to prevent infections before they start. Local hospitals are developing stringent protocols for room cleaning and hand washing to prevent patients from contracting these infections during hospital stays.

Bacteria can become immune to antibiotics when a person does not finish an entire course of antibiotics, or when a doctor prescribes them unnecessarily for a viral infection. Antibiotic resistance also arises in certain agricultural settings when farmers treat livestock indiscriminately with antibiotics, regardless of whether the animals are sick.

“Monterey County, in general, has a very low rate of multi-drug resistant organisms,” said Dr. Anthony Chavis, vice president of Medical Affairs and Patient Safety at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula. “Physicians in our community have a longstanding practice of being pretty good stewards of antibiotic use.”

Debra Johnson, manager of Infection Prevention and Control at Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System, echoes Chavis’ claim. The hospitals have systems in place to monitor and report drug-resistant cases, and they work closely with the Monterey County Health Department, she said.

“Working collaboratively is a big thing,” said Johnson.

The resistant bacteria find their way into hospitals when people contract an infection and seek medical care. But perfectly healthy people can also act as carriers. About three to eight percent of people have a drug-resistant bacterial species, such as MRSA, which stands for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, somewhere in or on their bodies. These bacteria can be deadly if they come in contact with an open wound, or enter a patient whose immune system is suppressed by drugs or disease. People in long-term care facilities are especially at risk because they often have insertable medical devices which can be openings to let in bacteria, as well as underlying health problems.

Hospitals have many ways to control the spread of bacteria around the hospital. Besides keeping catheters and IVs clean, and sterilizing wounds and surgical incisions, SVMHS and CHOMP also have meticulous daily cleaning regimens. They also practice “terminal cleaning” after a patient leaves, to ensure that no residual bacteria are left behind.

After technicians clean a room at SVMHS, they use a black light and a special chemical that glows in the presence of cells. The chemical reacts with a molecule that is found in all types of cells – both human and bacterial – called ATP. If nothing lights up, then the cleaning crew can be certain that there are no infectious cells left behind.

“It’s an easy way to be able to monitor the process of cleaning,” said Johnson.

Good hand hygiene is another vital aspect of infection control. Patients and visitors can play an active role

in making sure that everyone is constantly washing their hands. In April, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention launched a video campaign entitled “Hand Hygiene Saves Lives.” The video not only urges visitors to wash their hands, but also recommends that they ask doctors and nurses wash their hands each time they examine a patient.

SVMH and CHOMP both encourage their patients to prompt healthcare workers about hand washing. CHOMP has strict hand hygiene rules and employs a “secret shopper model” to make sure those standards are maintained. At SVMH, volunteers circulate through the hospital to remind patients and employees about the importance of hand washing. The volunteers use an iPad app called iScrub that lets observers log each time healthcare workers wash or use hand sanitizing gel.

“Everyone can hand wash,” Chavis said. “It’s an easy thing to do for family and providers to try to protect their patients, so that’s why we put so much emphasis on hand washing.”

Mee Memorial Hospital and Natividad Medical Center did not immediately respond to requests for comment on their infection control practices.