

# Nation

## Medical 'dirty secret' out in open

By Joyce Howard Price  
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The alarmingly high number of life-threatening infections occurring in U.S. hospitals has prompted medical staffs and state lawmakers to focus on better awareness and take steps to reduce the spread.

"For too long" hospitals and dialysis centers "have kept patient infections a dirty secret," said Lisa McGiffert, director of Consumer Union's Stop Hospital Infections campaign. "But now, more states are moving to make infection rates public, so consumers can make smarter health care choices, and hospitals have a stronger incentive to improve patient care."

Pennsylvania is one of the few states that require each hospital to report its number of infections. To date, 16 states, including Maryland and Virginia, have enacted laws requiring some level of reporting on patient infections, according to [StopHospitalInfections.org](http://StopHospitalInfections.org).

So far this year, hospital infection reporting bills are being considered by lawmakers in 12 other states.

Yesterday, the federal Centers for Disease Control and

### States expose infection rates

Prevention issued a report showing that people who receive kidney dialysis are at high risk for a particularly deadly bacterial infection that also plagues hospital patients.

The CDC report, based on 2005 surveillance data, found that dialysis patients were 100 times at higher risk than the general public for bloodstream infections with methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), the so-called superbug of medical settings.

In nine states that monitor dialysis patents for MRSA, the overall incidence was 45.2 cases per 1,000 dialysis population. "The rate varied . . . from 27.2 in California to 92.9 in Maryland," according to the report, published in the current issue of the CDC's *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report*.

Patient advocates interested in slashing the more than 2 million cases of hospital-acquired infections in the U.S. yearly and the 100,000 deaths they cause said at a press conference yesterday that screening all hospi-

tal patients for MRSA is vital to stopping its spread in health care facilities.

More than 126,000 MRSA infections are estimated to occur annually in U.S. hospitals, resulting in more than 5,000 deaths, said Fran Griffin, a director of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston.

Elizabeth McCaughey, a former lieutenant governor of New York, cited a study by researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, which found MRSA infections plunged 75 percent with patient screening for MRSA.

She said the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Pittsburgh and other hospitals in that city have been "well ahead of the curve" in trying to reduce infections.

For the past four years, every patient at the Pittsburgh VA hospital has been tested for MRSA, a policy that has worked in suppressing the drug-resistant bacterium at medical facilities in Europe.

It appears to be working. VA hospital officials recently told the *AARP Bulletin* that MRSA infections there have dropped from about 20 a year to one or two a year.