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A killer hospitals pretend to fight

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It's hard to know which is worse, the dying or the lying.

Four times as many people are dying from a hospital infection called C. diff as a decade ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It's the No. 1 hospital-infection killer in much of the nation, including New York. It kills more people than dreaded Staph infections, and about as many as AIDS.

What about the lying? Well, hospital personnel often tell patients and families that antibiotics are to blame. Sorry: The real culprit is inadequate cleaning in hospitals.

C. diff spreads through the hospital on nurses' uniforms, wheelchairs, bed sheets, call buttons and other surfaces. It can survive on surfaces for months. Patients touch these surfaces, then pick up food without washing their hands first, and swallow the germ along with their food. Once in the gastro-intestinal tract, C. diff can cause severe diarrhea, sometimes resulting in deadly complications.

How virulent is this germ? According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, a patient who goes into the hospital for one problem and then contracts C. diff is 4.5 times as likely to die as a patient admitted with the same diagnosis who avoids getting C. diff.

A shocking 9 percent of patients with C. diff don't survive their stay.

Yes, patients on heavy doses of antibiotics are especially vulnerable, because antibiotics kill other bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract that would keep C. diff under control. But antibiotics don't cause C. diff.

Contaminated surfaces are to blame. Most C. diff victims pick up the germ in the hospital; most of the rest, in a nursing home or doctor's office or during a previous hospital stay.

There's an answer. The Mayo Clinic reduced C. diff by 79 percent in a pilot project by doing one thing: wiping the frequently touched surfaces around patients' beds once a day with a bleach wipe.

You'd think hospitals everywhere would be scrubbing surfaces to duplicate this success. Outrageously, most are not.

The manpower used to mop floors could be redirected to cleaning surfaces doctors and patients touch. Bleach is essential, because the C. diff germ is encased in a hard shell, making it harder to kill on surfaces than the AIDS virus, for example.

Harder to kill on surfaces, but easier to deal with in every other way. It's a matter of cleaning, not addressing drug addiction or unsafe sex. Keep the surfaces around the patient's bed meticulously clean, and C. diff can be nearly eradicated. We have the knowledge; what's lacking is the will.

Although C. diff claims about the same number of American lives as AIDS, the Centers for Disease Control and hospitals are not responding with the passion that tamed the AIDS threat. The CDC says its aim is to reduce C. diff by 33 percent over five years — a pathetically timid goal.

CDC Director Thomas R. Frieden points to the agency's "6 Steps to Prevention." Glaringly absent are cleaning patients' hands or alerting them to clean their own hands if they are able.

The Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths donates printed tray cards for hospitals to remind patients to wash their hands before eating and avoid putting their utensils anywhere except their plate. Shamefully, hospital personnel say they don't want to tell patients about germs around the bed and the need to take precautions.

If you're going into the hospital, bring a canister of bleach wipes and a pair of gloves. It could save your life.

Betsy McCaughey is founder and chairman of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths (www.hospitalinfection.org.)