



News Release

Staff shortages could unleash superbug epidemic

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Understaffed hospitals with overfull wards could return us to the dark days of the late 1990's/early 2000's when mortality rates for the superbug MRSA rose fifteen-fold (1).

So says charity Antibiotic Research UK (**ANTRUK**) who believe that the over-occupancy still currently affecting hospitals across the country makes transmitting deadly bacteria easier. And they are also concerned that a dearth of nurses means that staff will simply be too busy to notice the shoddy levels of cleanliness that help bugs thrive – and eventually kill.

“Even with the winter crisis and the recent cold snap subsiding, hospital trusts are reporting cases of bed-blocking and overlong stays, and close proximity to other

patients enables superbugs to attack” said Professor Colin Garner, Chief Executive of ANTRUK. “Patients are also being robbed of their best eyes and ears when it comes to cleanliness. A recent survey (2) showed that nurses admit they are too busy to care for patients properly, and that could include not spotting poor examples of cleansing like empty hand sanitizers or dirty bed rails and equipment. There is evidence too that open drains and sinks are still being found in hospitals and I have even heard of cases where admin staff were being asked to help clean wards (3). This all adds up to a deadly cocktail which puts patient and visitor safety at mortal peril.”

ANTRUK’s warning comes in a year where preventing healthcare acquired infections has been made a key improvement area for the NHS (4). The charity believes that infection control teams have worked really hard since the early 2000s to educate staff about the importance of cleanliness, but that this work is being undone in what Garner describes as, “a dangerous round of cuts that are playing dice with patient safety.”

An example of lax cleansing was observed by a Manchester patient receiving treatment for blood cancer. The mother-of-one said: “I was about to have chemotherapy and was placed in strict isolation, when I saw a cleaner using the same cloth to clean surfaces as they had to clean the toilet. That cleaner should have been better managed and I am convinced that if a nurse or medic saw it, they would have prevented it.”

Without the support of beleaguered nurses, ANTRUK is asking patients and visitors to hospital to be vigilant and report incidents of improper cleaning to hospital complaint bodies like PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) which are located in every hospital trust.

Infections such as MRSA are also able to do their deadly work because some patients can become resistant to antibiotics such as amoxicillin and penicillin. Those particularly at risk include babies and older folks who have received hospital attention (including doses of antibiotics).

Colin Garner concluded: “Antibiotic resistance is potentially the biggest health problem facing humankind. If not addressed, we could see routine operations cancelled for fear of infection and something as simple as a dirty scratch becoming

fatal. We need Government, medical research organisations, the pharmaceutical industry and the public to work together to develop new but effective medications, fast. And while we wait for that to happen, we must do everything in our power to prevent the spread of bacterial infections – especially in our hospitals.”

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For further information

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Learn more about Antibiotic Research UK (ANTRUK) at www.antibioticresearch.org.uk

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References:

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- (2) <https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/urgent-action-needed-to-tackle-staffing-crisis>
- (3) <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/899757/NHS-crisis-latest-news-scotland-hospitals-axe-operations-australian-flu-jeremy-hunt>
- (4) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/five-year-forward-view/next-steps-on-the-nhs-five-year-forward-view/patient-safety/>