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SC hospitals join forces to combat infections

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There are some sobering statistics on infections in hospitals.

A 2007 study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated there are 4.5 hospital infections for every 100 patient admissions and nearly 100,000 deaths from hospital infection.

In an effort to combat the situation, South Carolina's private and university research hospitals have joined forces under the newly created South Carolina Healthcare Quality Trust. The trust is a partnership of Health Sciences South Carolina, the South Carolina Hospital Association and the Premier health care alliance, which offers purchasing networks and clinical and financial information for 2,100 nonprofit hospitals nationwide.

Beaufort Memorial Hospital already is involved in the Speak Up program, a national effort to reduce hospital infection rates is among the state's 64 other acute care hospitals taking part in the South Carolina Healthcare Quality Trust.

"We've been really involved in this and working on infection control issues for a long time," said Pat Foulger, vice president for quality at Beaufort Memorial Hospital. "In fact, we were one of the hospitals in South Carolina that participated in a ... research study where we began doing surveillance of patients to see if they came into the hospital with MRSA (Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus), (which) is one of the most dangerous hospital infections, and also most common.

"The reason it's so well-known and is such an issue is because it's resistant to many types of antibiotics that you would normally treat a staph infection with."

Foulger added that if patients were found to be carrying MRSA, Beaufort Memorial would place them in isolation to prevent the spread of the disease in the hospital.

"I anticipate they'll be similar types of recommendations that will come out of the research that's done here in South Carolina," she said. "The VHA study had teams and groups that were trying out different things to try to reduce infections in hospitals, and we were very interested in participating and had the opportunity to do so. It's benefited us."


According to the South Carolina Healthcare Quality Trust, curbing infections could save the state's hospitals as much as \$40 million a year and reduce the length of stay of patients by up to 24,000 days annually. The three partners will be investing more than \$1.7 million over three years in the effort.

"We will be using our state's best researchers to determine the causes of specific infections," Health Sciences chief executive Jay Moskowicz said in a statement. "We will test solutions in our state's four largest health systems, which today treat about 30 percent of all patients. We will then share the best practices, products and services that result with all South Carolina hospitals. We believe this approach has the potential to make our state's hospitals safer for patients, families and employees."


Beaufort Memorial is a member of the South Carolina Hospital Association, and Foulger said the facility has worked with Premier on a few issues. She believes that while one hospital infection is a problem, Beaufort Memorial has performed well in this arena.

"Our rates, compared to others in the nation and others in South Carolina, are very good," she said. "Every hospital has spikes in their infections, and when that happens, the important thing is that you're doing surveillance, and if you see an increase, you're going back and re-educating and making sure that patients are protected by the staff doing the right things to prevent the spread of infection.

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"That includes washing their hands and using gloves when they're changing dressings and educating the patients and their families about the spread of infection. We spend a lot of time doing that."

Foulger added that hospital infections are a major issue because Medicare does not pay for preventable infections that occur in hospitals.

"So every hospital -- not only because of payment, but because it's the right thing to do -- tracks those infections and does what they can to prevent that from happening," she said. "Our goal is to make sure that we give the best care possible so our patients are not subjected to infections, and when they are that they're identified quickly and appropriately treated."


One step that Beaufort Memorial already has taken to prevent hospital infections was participating in the surgical site infection program, which was sponsored by Medicare and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

"Our goal there is to get antibiotics given to the patients pre-operatively to prevent them from getting an infection after a surgical procedure," Foulger said. "These are all national standards of practice that we measure ourselves against in hopes that we do well, and we do very well in most of those."

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