



The Dirt on Hospital Uniforms

September 13, 2011 by [Patrick A. Malone](#)

It's enough to make you want to shrink-wrap yourself in your hospital bed.

A report published in the American Journal of Infection Control concluded that as many as 6 in 10 uniforms worn by hospital caregivers [tested positive for potentially dangerous bacteria](#).

Swabs of the uniforms of 75 RNs and 60 M.D.s at a 550-bed university-affiliated hospital yielded cultures containing multidrug-resistant germs including methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA – also known as the “super bug.”

That's not a compliment.

According to AboutLawsuits.com, MRSA infections represent more than 60% of [hospital staph infections](#), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tally some 126,000 hospital MRSA infections every year, resulting in about 5,000 deaths. Some researchers believe that the number of deaths every year from MRSA in the U.S. is about 20,000 if community-acquired infections are included.

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As you might imagine, the number of infection-related lawsuits filed against hospitals also has increased in recent years.

Even if the clothing itself does not present an immediate risk of disease transmission, the results are disturbing for what they reflect about antibiotic-resistant strains in close proximity to hospital patients — the people most vulnerable to contracting disease.

The key message here for hospital staff isn't necessarily to wash your uniform; it's to practice what every thinking health caregiver has been preaching for years: Wash your hands.

“Any clothing that is worn by humans will become contaminated with microorganisms,” said Russell Olmsted, president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology. “The cornerstone of infection prevention remains the use of hand hygiene to prevent to movement of microbes from these surfaces to patients.”

The World Health Organization pegs the risk of health care-associated infection in some developing countries at as much as 20 times higher than in developed countries like the U.S. But they're still relatively common here, they can be deadly and they are expensive to treat. **Prevention** is the only way to guarantee patient safety.

As **we've reported before**, if you or a loved one is scheduled for a hospital stay, ask in advance for a copy of the facility's infection prevention and control program. And if a hospital or clinical caregiver forgets, don't be too timid to ask that person to wash his or her hands before attending to you.

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