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Warning on Hospital Infection

The New York Times

ATLANTA (AP) — As one superbug seems to be fading as a threat in hospitals, another is on the rise, a new study suggests.

A dangerous, drug-resistant staph infection called MRSA is often seen as the biggest germ threat to patients in hospitals and other health care facilities. But infections from *Clostridium difficile* — known as C-diff — are surpassing MRSA infections, the study of 28 hospitals in the Southeast found.

“I think MRSA is almost a household name,” said Dr. Becky Miller, an infectious diseases specialist at Duke University Medical Center. “Everybody thinks of MRSA as a serious threat.” Dr. Miller presented the research on Saturday in Atlanta at a medical conference on infection in health care facilities.

“But *C. difficile* deserves more attention,” she said.

MRSA, or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, are bacteria that cannot be treated with common antibiotics. They are often harmless as they ride on the skin, but become deadly once they get in the bloodstream. They enter through wounds, intravenous lines and other paths.

C-diff, also resistant to some antibiotics, is found in the colon and can cause diarrhea and a more serious intestinal condition known as colitis. It is spread by spores in feces. The spores are difficult to kill with most conventional household cleaners or alcohol-based hand sanitizers, so some of the disinfection measures against MRSA do not work on C-diff.

Deaths from C-diff traditionally have been rare, but a more dangerous form has emerged in the last 10 years. Still, MRSA is generally considered a more lethal threat, causing an estimated 18,000 deaths annually in the United States.

The new study looked at infection rates from community hospitals in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia in 2008 and 2009. It found the rate of hospital-acquired C-diff infections was 25 percent higher than MRSA infections.

The hospitals counted 847 infections of hospital-acquired C-diff, and 680 cases of MRSA.

Dr. Miller also reported that C-diff was increasing at the hospitals since 2007, while MRSA has been declining since 2005.