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Quality Center Update

One State's Big Goal: No HAIs

By Charles D. Beaman Jr. and Susan D. DeVore

Each day, millions of patients across the country rely on their community hospitals to improve their health and wellness. But these hospitals are also where some patients will acquire a dangerous and potentially lethal infection.



Health care-associated infections are not rare. The causes of HAIs are well-known to health care providers, and many are preventable using evidence-based, common-sense interventions. Basic infection prevention measures, such as hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand cleaners, are the primary ways to prevent the transfer of microorganisms from patient to patient. But even though we know what causes HAIs and how they spread, we have not succeeded in eliminating them. We can and we should do better.

The infection revolution starts in South Carolina

In February, Health Sciences South Carolina, the South Carolina Hospital Association and the Premier health care alliance banded together to form the South Carolina Healthcare Quality Trust, a patient safety and performance improvement partnership dedicated to eliminating preventable HAIs across the state.

Through the partnership, the state's largest research universities—Clemson University, Medical University of South Carolina and the University of South Carolina—and its largest health systems—Greenville Hospital System, Palmetto Health and Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System—are utilizing existing evidence-based best practices, as well as researching and developing new methods, to eliminate preventable infections.

A special information-sharing portal will be developed for all South Carolina hospitals to learn more about prevention measures that have been tested and proven to work in the acute care setting. Each hospital will be challenged to continuously assess performance against state and national benchmarks, and to openly discuss what's working and what's not as a care community dedicated to rapidly initiating and sustaining safety improvements. Working together in this way, South Carolina hospitals will have the tools they need to save up to \$40 million in unnecessary costs associated with treating preventable infections and decrease the hospital length of stay by nearly 24,000 days.

Although other states have enacted HAI reporting requirements or helped to fund regional infection prevention efforts, the HAI prevention partnership in South Carolina is unique. This program will go well beyond statewide reporting requirements, bringing together academics, hospitals and the private sector to do the real-world work needed to eliminate preventable HAIs. Second, the partnership was initiated by the hospital community for the hospital community and is a completely voluntary effort, not a mandate from the state or federal government. Third, the program is not limited in scope to a specific infection, hospital department or region. The program will address all preventable HAIs in each of the state's 65 acute care hospitals, across the entire patient mix. And lastly, all hospitals will be able to participate and utilize research and performance improvement tools completely free of charge.

We challenge other states to follow our progress and to enact similar programs based on the lessons

learned and the successes we are sure to achieve going forward.

With a commitment to improve and a model for successful collaboration, hospitals across the country can follow South Carolina's lead to improve patient care. For too long we've accepted the status quo in the belief that a certain number of infections are expected and nonpreventable. But considering that 1.7 million patients a year contract HAIs, resulting in 99,000 deaths and more than \$6.2 billion a year in unnecessary expenses, we can no longer afford that kind of complacency. Even one infected patient is one too many.

The time has come for revolutionary new approaches to tackling this very real public health issue, and the South Carolina Healthcare Quality Trust will certainly serve as a national standard for others to follow. Eliminating all preventable HAIs is an aggressive charge, but nothing less is acceptable. Our patients are counting on us.

Author bios

Charles D. Beaman Jr. serves as president and chief executive officer of Palmetto Health, the largest integrated health care delivery system in South Carolina. Susan D. DeVore is incoming president and CEO for the Premier health care alliance, a 2006 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipient. Visit the AHA Quality Center at www.ahaqualitycenter.org to explore these and other topics.