

Super-bug invades Burlington's Brant hospital

By PAUL MITCHISON
Special to The Champion

Seven people were in isolation recently at Burlington's Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital, carrying a bacteria for which there is no treatment.

The presence of this so-called super bug was first discovered in mid-December. Since then, 10 cases have occurred. The growth of the bacteria in patients has been seen at hospitals across North America, but only recently became a concern in Halton. It's known medically as VRE, or vancomycin-resistant enterococcus.

"There's no vaccine, no treatment and no antibiotic," said Dr. Nick Cuberovic, a Burlington family doctor, who said the infection likely contributed to the recent death of an elderly patient.

"It's caused problems in the United States, and we were hoping we wouldn't see it in Canada for quite some time, but it has arrived," he said.

The presence of the bug is causing an inconvenience in an already-overcrowded hospital, with carriers being separated from the rest of the patients, according to Jo Brant staff.

While most who acquire the bug will become healthy through their own body defenses, it has become a serious health threat to those whose immunity is already low.

Jo Brant's acting chief of medicine, Dr. Ian Darcel, said there's no reason for the general population to be "overly concerned", though it will remain an inconvenience for medical staff, forcing increased testing and separating of patients.

"I suspect it's going to be a problem for some time to come," said Dr. Darcel. "But it's something the hospital will have to recognize, so the threat of it is minimized."

Most patients require three weeks for their bodies to become free of the bug. Fortunately, most don't become ill while they are invaded by VRE, though there can be infection and serious medical consequences for certain patients.

An Infection Control Bulletin was issued at

Joseph Brant Memorial in December, then updated in January, warning hospital staff of precautions necessary to halt the spread.

Patients with VRE are being discharged from hospital if possible, while others have been put in isolation, to let the disease run its course.

Staff who deal with infected patients are being told to wash their hands and take other sanitary precautions.

Among those most at risk are people who's disease resistance is lowered, such as those in hospital intensive care and burn units, and those who've been receiving antibiotics.

VRE has been detected in a significant number of American hospitals. There have also been reported cases at hospitals in Toronto and elsewhere.

Dave Stronach, of the environmental diseases department at Halton Region, said numbers aren't currently collected to track the prevalence of VRE.

Area hospitals are doing a good job of ensuring against the spread of the infection, Mr.

Stronach said. The bacteria can be spread on bed rails, door knobs, or survive on hands.

"It's really not a problem in the community as a whole," said Mr. Stronach. "What you don't want is to have this in a facility because, sooner or later, someone who is susceptible could get it, and become sick."

In the medical community, there is concern the growth of certain bacteria, such as VRE, is a result of over-prescribing antibiotics. The result is certain kinds of bacteria are becoming more difficult to treat. Vancomycin is a powerful antibiotic, used only in hospitals, and usually as a last resort.

Part of a hospital's standard approach to dealing with the bacteria, apart from separating patients with the bug, is telling staff to refrain from offering antibiotics unnecessarily.

Said Cuberovic, "If you're giving antibiotic to otherwise healthy people, with a cold or flu, where an antibiotic can't kill the viral infection, you then teach bacteria in your own body to become resistant to the antibiotic."

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