

Fewer patients catching superbug in hospitals

Rigorous hand hygiene regime and active checks reduce MRSA infections

By JOAN CHEW

A SUPERBUG which spreads easily in hospital conditions and is a major problem in many countries has become less prevalent in most public hospitals here as a result of strict infection controls.

The Health Ministry told The Straits Times that the infection rate of the methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) bacteria in public hospitals was down to 2.1 cases per 1,000 patients in 2008 from three in 1,000 in 2002.

Last year's figures are not yet available. Most effective was the National University Hospital (NUH), which logged 1.6 MRSA infections per 1,000 patients in 2008, down from its all-time high of 4.2 in 2003.

Other hospitals where the incidences had gone down since 2002 were the Singapore General Hospital, Alexandra Hospital and KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

The MRSA bug, which is spread through contact with contaminated surfaces, infected persons or carriers without symptoms, can be deadly for the sick.

Long-staying patients and those who are repeatedly admitted are believed to be at greater risk.

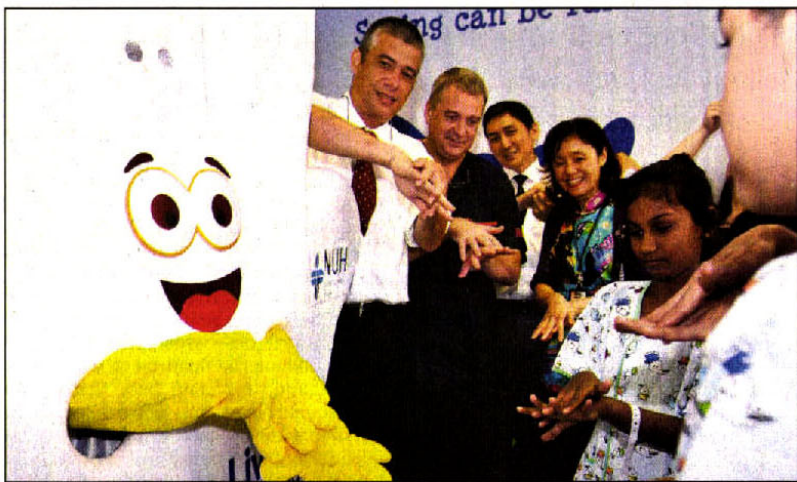
NUH said a rigorous hand hygiene regime and the active screening for MRSA among patients are the key reasons for its success in reducing infection rates.

The hospital now swabs about 70 per cent of all ward admissions and 96 per cent of all intensive care unit and high dependency admissions for MRSA.

From July, it will also start to screen nearly every patient, said Associate Professor Dale Fisher, chairman of the NUH Infection Control Committee.

Screening patients on admission for the bacteria will allow the hospital to know whether they caught the bug in hospital if they become infected.

The exceptions will be children and patients from the obstetrics and gynaecology department, as their rate of infection is al-



NUH's hand hygiene mascot is helping promote the practice. With it are (from left) Associate Professor Aymeric Lim, chairman of the NUH Medical Board; Associate Professor Dale Fisher, chairman of the Infection Control Committee; Mr Noel Cheah, NUH chief operating officer; Mrs Lee Siu Yin, director of nursing; and nine-year-old patient Keertikah Mayalaggan. ST PHOTO: AIDAH RAUF

ready very low, said Dr Fisher.

He added that NUH will eventually be screening its health-care workers as well.

NUH conducts 80 mystery audits each month to make sure staff are complying with hand hygiene controls.

As a result, a patient admitted into a general ward at NUH today has a 3.5 per cent chance of getting MRSA - whether or not he shows the symptoms - compared with 9.3 per cent two years ago.

Other hospitals do selective screening of high-risk patients, though Tan Tock Seng Hospital plans to extend it to general

wards, said Dr Brenda Ang, its senior consultant on infectious diseases.

Surprise hand hygiene audits of staff are also now a feature at hospitals.

The World Health Organisation has marked today as Hand Hygiene Day, even as hospitals reinforce the practice among their staff and patients.

Dr Fisher said patients can also help to curb MRSA infections: "If the hospital staff slip up and forget, patients can remind them to clean their hands before touching them."

joanchew@sph.com.sg