

TTSH declares war on superbug

Staff hand-hygiene drive is latest step in push to reduce MRSA infections

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FOR two months from last December, 5,000 employees of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) were taught how to wash their hands.

And if these individuals in frequent contact with patients did not get the seven-step ritual right, they risked being caught by a "secret auditor".

Shades of Big Brother?

Maybe, but this was carried out by the public hospital which, in 2007, had the second-highest rate of infections caused by a bacterium known as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA).

TTSH is determined to cut down the number of patients who become infected with this superbug under its roof.

Protecting them from infection helps the hospital too, since these patients end up extending their stay by several weeks, occupying much-needed beds, said Associate Professor Philip Choo, who chairs the hospital's medical board.

MRSA is of concern because it is resistant to the more common antibiotics, making the infection stubborn and more expensive to treat.

For the patient, it means added suffering and a higher bill, in addition to being at risk of blood poisoning, a weakened heart, multiple organ failure or even death.

In some hospitals here, one in 300 patients gets infected. Experts say that every two days, one patient - who may have died from his original ailment anyway - dies after catching MRSA.

Professor Chng Hlok Hee, who is leading TTSH's effort to stamp out the superbug, said the lack of hand hygiene is the most important cause of hospital-acquired infection.

Some doctors do not know the right way to clean their hands, she said, hence the training class.

Those "secret auditors" are keeping tabs of the times hospital staff do it wrongly, or forget to do it.

The results of the audit will be put up, so everyone - even patients - will know.

Prof Choo said: "This will not be popular, but we have to do it. If there is no audit, the practice will slide and it will be difficult to revive it."

To sweeten the deal, the auditors will hand out lucky draw tickets to those who maintain proper hand hygiene.

To fight this bug, TTSH also created a 38-bed MRSA ward last year to house patients down with it.

He explained, however, that not all patients with MRSA are put there. Some cannot be, because they need special treatment available in wards set up for their ailments, such as neurology wards.

MRSA has also changed the way TTSH doctors prescribe antibiotics. Misuse of this class of drugs is often cited as the reason drug-resistant bugs appear.

Monthly checks are done in different parts of the hospital to root out the bugs found there and to identify the antibiotics they have become resistant to, if any.

Patients are also checked for the bugs causing their infection. If they test positive, their doctors are told, so they can be put on more appropriate drugs.

TTSH is also waging the battle among the visitors to the wards. As the bug can also be brought in by them or passed on by patients, a campaign on hand hygiene will be run next month with this group. Visitors who take part in the drive will get lucky draw tickets.

The top prize for staff and visitors is a car sponsored by Subaru Motorimage.

Prof Choo sees yet another battlefield - the communal toilets in the subsidised wards. He said he hopes to reorganise the wards so that the toilets are shared by fewer patients, which can be done when the new hospital in Yishun opens next year and eases the crush on TTSH's beds.

"This will limit any chain of infection," he said.

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See Forum, Page A31



Big signs on the floor remind TTSH staff, patients and visitors to wash their hands. Hospital employees follow a seven-step ritual for hand-washing. The lack of hand hygiene is the most important cause of hospital-acquired infection, says Prof Chng. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

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What other hospitals are doing

■ SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL

All new staff are trained in hand hygiene. Patients in wards are given infection-control leaflets and briefed. Alcohol rubs are placed in wards, lift lobbies and corridors.

Colourful posters on hygiene are rotated around the hospital every fortnight, and fun campaigns are run to encourage hand hygiene.

■ NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

It launched a 10-year campaign in 2007 to check patients for the methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus bacteria and shares the information with hospitals in the National Healthcare Group.

It checks over 30 per cent of patients, deemed "high risk", in four intensive care and six surgical wards now. The checks will be extended to other wards.