

# When it pays to keep your hands clean ...

Hospitals fought good fight against superbug last year, as infection rates go down at five institutions

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SINGAPORE — They screened patients, reminded staff to wash their hands thoroughly, and conducted audits to see if standards were followed.

The aggressive efforts adopted by public hospitals last year to tackle the superbug MRSA — or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* — have paid off.

Infection rates have gone down for five of the six hospitals, and the remaining one is holding steady.

MRSA infects hundreds of hospital patients a year and is a bacterium resistant to more common antibiotics. It is difficult to treat and can cause serious problems like blood poisoning.

The hospitals' combined average was 0.3 MRSA infections per 1,000 patient days last year, compared to the 0.4 seen in 2008 and 2007, according to Ministry of Health (MOH) figures released recently.

Behind the improved numbers are new initiatives by some hospitals to tackle the superbug, and sustained efforts by others to maintain the downward trend.

Doctors said the overall improvement — despite hospitals adopting different measures — shows there is no single formula to tackle the problem.

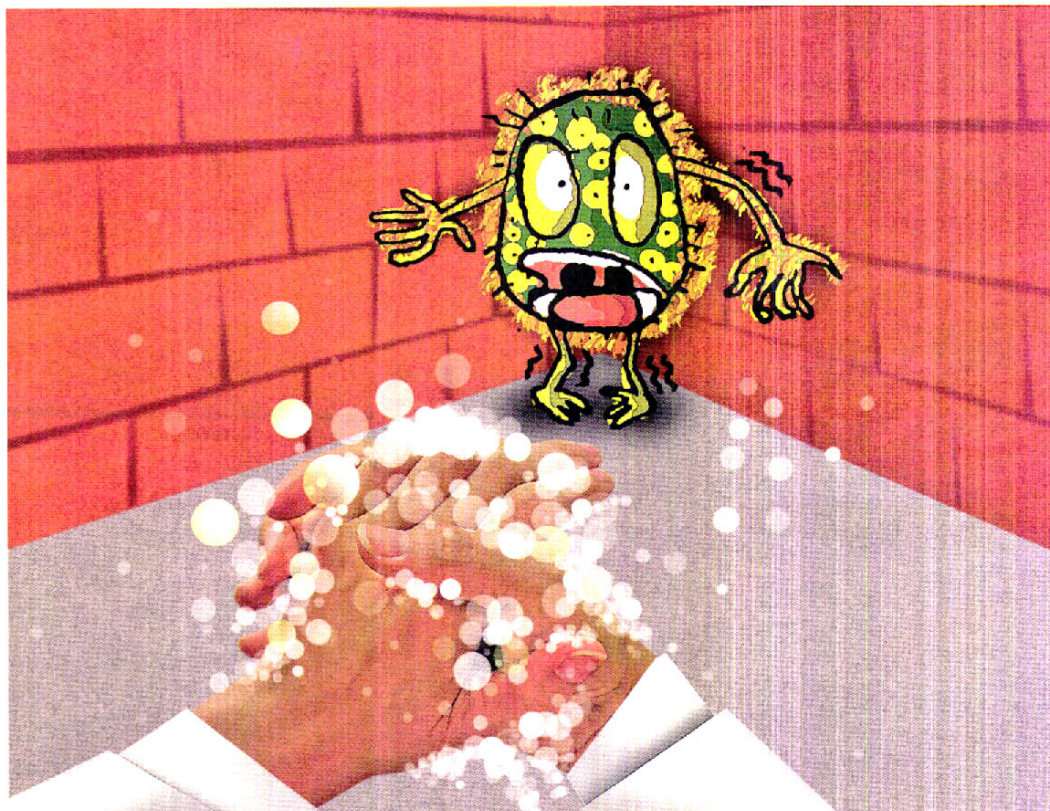
## NO MAGIC BULLET

The National University Hospital (NUH), for instance, intends to conduct hospital-wide MRSA screening by July. It currently screens over seven in 10 general ward patients, and 95 per cent of its intensive care and high dependance ward patients. Together with measures like the creation of an MRSA-free ward, this has cut infection rates by 40 per cent over three years, said Associate Professor Dale Fisher, its head of infectious diseases.

On the other hand, Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), is unable to set up a clean ward due to high occupancy, said its infection control committee chairman Brenda Ang. So it took the opposite tack of "cohorting" MRSA cases. Its MRSA infections per 1,000 patient days fell from 0.5 in 2008 to 0.3 last year.

"There is no magic bullet that is going to solve everybody's problems," said TTSH's medical board chairman Professor Philip Choo.

Hospitals have to adopt measures with factors like their caseload and patient mix in mind, he said.



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## FOSTERING A CULTURE

But the common goal is clear: working towards zero infections.

"Our ultimate goal is to achieve zero MRSA. By setting an aggressive stretch goal, we hope to at least achieve the lowest MRSA infection rate," said a spokesman for Alexandra Hospital (AH).

TTSH's target for this year is a reduction of up to 30 per cent compared to last year. Its plans include more extensive screening of patients, especially when its load eases with the opening of the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Yishun.

Last year, TTSH began screening elective surgery patients for MRSA.

Its intensive care unit patients and those with renal conditions are already being screened.

TTSH also wants to continue fostering a culture where junior staff are not afraid to remind senior staff to wash their hands,

said Dr Ang.

As MRSA infection rates dropped, handwashing among staff went up.

Hand hygiene compliance rates at TTSH vary from "30-something per cent to about 70 per cent", said Dr Ang.

The hospital, which rotates the monthly audits among its 41 wards, is aiming for more wards to achieve higher compliance as 70 per cent. That is "about as high as most places are able to achieve", noted Prof Choo.

The challenge is in doing it repeatedly — up to 20 to 30 times each round a staff member makes, he said.

## GETTING VISITORS TO FOLLOW SUIT

While busyness is not an excuse, hand hygiene might not be the first thing that comes to mind when staff are rushing to save a life, Dr Ang explained.

Compliance at AH — which also

conducts monthly audits — is between 60 and 70 per cent, with a steady increase in the past year, said a spokesperson.

At NUH, compliance has increased from 38 per cent in 2008 to 60 per cent in the first quarter of this year.

The next area to tackle is getting more visitors to follow suit.

Changi General Hospital staff, for instance, encourage patients' family members wash their hands and have produced an educational MRSA brochure.

Last year's improvements may be cause for joy, but doctors caution that combating MRSA infections is a long term effort.

"While there may be value in introducing new measures, it is more important to be able to sustain a programme," said NUH's Assoc Prof Fisher.

"It is well-known ... that it takes a decade of activities to see the fruits of the labour."