

Spreading the word

While the Coalition has made some positive changes to the MRSA policy it inherited from Labour, more must be done to educate the public about infection control, says MRSA Action UK Chair Derek Butler...

When coming to power in May of last year, the Coalition Government inherited an MRSA screening programme introduced by the previous Labour administration. Despite the programme not being universally welcomed, MRSA Action UK gave it a cautious welcome. We understood that to make further reductions in MRSA bacteraemias, it was important to follow our northern Scandinavian partners in Europe, who have had a very successful comprehensive screening policy for a number of years. While the UK policy introduced in 2008 fell far short of following their example, it was nevertheless a step in the right direction.

Our belief is that the screening policy should have included other pathogens, and should have been backed with an education campaign to inform patients and the public of what the screening for MRSA entailed, as well as the implications if a patient tested positive. There is a huge difference between colonisation and infection, and media hype has caused untold worries for those informed they have tested positive for MRSA.

The new Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley, announced changes to this programme in June last year by including other pathogens, such as MSSA and *E. coli*; however, these will not be totally included until January 2011 for MSSA and, as yet, no date has been set for the introduction of mandatory screening for *E. coli* – we would have liked to have seen both introduced at the same time. Some hospital trusts, to their great credit, have already begun to screen for MSSA and *E. coli* ahead of any deadlines, and this should be applauded.

The Department of Health (DoH) has introduced a campaign to make those entering hospital for elective surgery aware of why they are being screened for MRSA, which is another positive step. However, the DoH does not share MRSA Action UK's belief in the importance of an information campaign informing the public as to how to take proper precautions to prevent the spread of bacteria both in hospital and in the community. *E. coli* bacteria affects more people in the community than it does in our hospitals, and the death rate from this bacterium is actually higher than from MRSA.

Andrew Lansley: Mandatory surveillance

Secretary of State for Health Andrew Lansley has identified infection control in UK hospitals as a major concern. "Patients deserve the highest standards of care and expect to be kept safe from harm in hospital," he declared in October. "We are now publishing weekly MRSA and *C.difficile* statistics, enabling patients to make an informed decision about where to go for treatment, based on the issues which matter to them.

"We will extend our system of mandatory reporting...to include MSSA from January 2011, with others like *E.coli* to follow in line with expert advice.

"We have seen the impact that mandatory surveillance can have, with lower MRSA and *C.difficile* rates – by extending that surveillance and making it available to patients in a timely and transparent manner, we aim to successfully drive down other infections."¹

Lansley has also stated his determination to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to tackling all preventable infections, and deaths, from MRSA, *C.difficile* and other superbugs in hospitals.

"There is no tolerable level of preventable infections. The only acceptable strategy is a zero-tolerance strategy."²

¹ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/MediaCentre/Pressreleases/DH_120208

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1285110/Wipe-superbugs-Health-Secretary-Andrew-Lansley-orders-hospitals.html>



Andrew Lansley has met victims of healthcare infections and shares their concerns. As an advocate of the Dutch method of 'Search and Destroy', for which having a comprehensive screening policy is an integral part, he now needs to improve on what he inherited, to give patients confidence that their safety is paramount.



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