

Waking Up To MRSA - In A Czech Hospital In 2003

By EDWARD ALWOOD

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This past week, reports of serious infections caused by MRSA, a drug-resistant germ, awakened millions of Americans to a deadly mystery. On Monday, a 17-year-old Virginia high school senior died of complications from MRSA (methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus). By Friday, the bacteria had been found in students from three towns. Three students at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven have infections.

I had not heard of the "super bug" until January 2003, when I woke from a medically induced coma in a hospital in the Czech Republic.

I had been in Prague for only a few hours when I fell into a construction site in the middle of a train station, breaking my back and suffering severe head injuries. When I woke from the coma six weeks later, I did not know where I was, why or what language the hospital workers were speaking. Finally, a nurse who spoke broken English told me I had had an accident.

For three weeks, doctors with grim faces monitored me in the intensive-care unit. My injuries were complicated by pneumonia and MRSA. I had become septic: The infection had spread throughout my body, a life-threatening condition. I refused further surgeries at the Czech hospital.

I was barely able to walk, but I managed to climb aboard a jet that brought me to Boston. I was taken to Yale Hospital. Doctors there explained that I had contracted a staph infection at the Czech hospital - probably because someone on the surgical team had failed to wash his hands. "Do you realize that there are people dying of this in this hospital?" one Yale doctor asked me.

As I underwent several operations to contain my infection, I would say to the surgical staff, "I hope you've washed your hands." The hospital kept me isolated until I could be released to a rehab hospital, where I was housed with another patient who had contracted MRSA; his leg had to be amputated.

Colleagues brought my laptop computer to help pass the hours in bed. An Internet search showed me that MRSA had reached epidemic proportions in London. I learned for the first time that up to 19,000 Americans die of complications from MRSA each year. (Last year, 880 people in Connecticut were diagnosed with it.) It may be even more deadly than the dreaded AIDS virus.

I remained in rehab for four months, on a continuous drip of vancomycin, the only antibiotic known to fight the resistant bacteria. "If this doesn't work, I don't know what we can do," doctors said. If the looks on their faces were not enough to terrify me, the treatment was making my nights sleepless. Nurses changed the bandages covering my wounds daily, but they stubbornly refused to heal.

In April, I began to show signs of healing and the doctors let me go home. Bags of vancomycin would be delivered to my doorstep and I would administer the liquid myself, 24 hours a day, carefully flushing the intravenous lines and connecting the tubes to the bags. A nurse would visit every few days. This regimen continued for nearly a month until doctors determined that my wounds had closed at last. I could unplug the intravenous drip and regain my freedom.

Throughout all of this, I wondered: Why had I never heard of the bacteria that threatened to kill me? How could I have missed this epidemic?

I contacted a reporter at The New York Times who shared my concerns. But he discussed the story with his editors and they had no interest. I next contacted a former student who worked as a television producer at a network affiliate in Baltimore. She researched the illness and found a Maryland man who had been infected by MRSA and died. But when she proposed the story to newsroom executives, the news director said, "No, it's not interesting enough to a Baltimore audience."

Although I was a reporter for 14 years, there are some things about the news business I do not understand. MRSA is in the headlines now, but it is certainly not new. Nor are its causes. Having survived MRSA, I cannot help but wonder which is more lethal: the deadly bacteria or news people who fail to grasp the seriousness of an epidemic in its early stages.

My message is the same as it was four years ago when I began to understand MRSA: Please wash your hands.

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