

Law impels nursing homes to axe infections

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Midstate hospitals have been under intense pressure during the past few years to cut down on infections that threaten patients' safety.

Now, nursing homes are feeling the heat.

Gov. Ed Rendell signed legislation in late July that requires nursing homes to fight infections more aggressively. It's a shift in policy many midstate facilities have expected as public knowledge of the danger and cost of infections grows.



"The nursing homes really take infection control seriously," said Phenelle Segal of Montgomery County-based Infection Control Consulting Services. "Nursing homes recognize that they need to proceed with this."

Respiratory, urinary-tract and skin infections are among the most common bugs to strike nursing-home residents. The state Department of Health oversees infection-control programs in nursing homes and can fine and discipline homes that do not adequately contain outbreaks. The legislation signed by Rendell requires nursing homes to report infections to the state's Patient Safety Authority and to develop infection-control plans. These plans must include a system to address patients with drug-resistant organisms and a protocol guiding workers dealing with infections, among other requirements.

Changes in how health care is delivered have made it more challenging for nursing homes to control outbreaks, said Caroline Bercosky, vice president and executive director of skilled-nursing facilities for Country Meadows Retirement Communities. The Derry Township, Dauphin

County-based company operates nursing homes in Allegheny and Northampton counties. Patients in hospitals are sicker than ever, meaning that many of them are more prone to complications once they come to a nursing home, Bercosky said.

The frequent transferring of patients between nursing-home and hospital settings also helps spread infections, said Joyce Heisey, assistant director of nursing at Masonic Village at Elizabethtown. The long-term care organization operates a 453-bed skilled-nursing facility in Lancaster County.

"What (the hospitals) transfer to us becomes ours, and what we have, infection-wise, becomes theirs," Heisey said.

Nursing homes take many of the same precautions as hospitals when it comes to controlling infections. Promoting hand-washing and curtailing the overuse of antibiotics are top priorities, said Dr. Leon Kraybill of Geriatric Associates in East Hempfield Township, Lancaster County. Using antibiotics too often can lead to infections that are resistant to traditional treatments.

"I don't think it's rocket science what we need to do," said Kraybill, who is medical director at two Lancaster County nursing homes, Luther Acres in Lititz and the Mennonite Home in Lancaster.

Nursing homes have added educational efforts to their infection-suppression arsenals, too. Organizations monitor infections so they can spot trends. Many homes also provide employees with infection-control training.

There should be more cooperation between nursing homes and hospitals so they can work together to eliminate infections, Segal said. Both sides could do more to communicate with each other about outbreaks, she said.

Nursing homes might not have a choice soon. Kraybill said he expects government — and public — attention to homes' infection-control efforts to continue to increase. Homes that do not take that attention seriously might get hit in their pocketbooks, he said.

"I suspect there will be more government scrutiny and reimbursements tied to (infection control)," Kraybill said.