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## Tough to Kill C. Diff

**A New Challenge for Healthcare Cleaning Professionals**

**BY ROBERT KRAVITZ**

**In recent years** we have heard quite a bit about the potentially deadly disease known as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA. In fact, according to Medical News Today, MRSA infections are more common in the United States than was previously thought.

Worse yet, the disease, which once was contracted only in healthcare settings, has now found its way into schools and other public facilities.

Another disease that is getting less attention but growing in speed of infection and virulence is called Clostridium difficile, or C. diff. This disease, which is primarily a hospital-acquired illness found in healthcare settings such as long-term care centers and nursing homes, may now be spreading to other types of facilities as well.

C. diff is most frequently contracted by the elderly and those with recent exposure to hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare institutions. It is transmitted by hand contact with items contaminated by feces. In the past five years, a more virulent and antibiotic-resistant strain has developed that has been associated with more serious disease, treatment failures and deaths.

A report recently released by the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) found that:

- Thirteen out of every 1,000 patients in U.S. medical facilities, approximately 7,178 people on any given day, are infected or colonized with C. diff (94.4 percent were infected).
- The rate is 6.5 to 20 times higher than previous incidence estimates.
- The report estimated that these infections cost between \$17.6 million and \$51.5 million, and cause or are one reason for the deaths of as many as 400 patients every day. Managers in these types of facilities, along with building service contractors that clean them, need a good understanding of how this disease is spread and how they can protect themselves and the facility users.

As with many diseases, the source of C. diff bacteria is typically fecal spores from the waste of patients. The spores are shed onto surfaces and fixtures such as toilets and can be spread by nurses or cleaning attendants who touch an infected toilet and then visit the next patient or room without properly washing their hands or changing their gloves.

"Additionally, cleaning technicians utilizing cleaning cloths and tools in multiple areas can [spread the disease] and cause cross contamination," says Peter J. Sheldon Sr., vice-president of Operations for Coverall Cleaning Concepts, which is involved in the cleaning and maintenance of healthcare facilities throughout the United States.

"Recent studies by microbiologists have reported this as well."

Sheldon maintains that the first line of defense in stopping the spread of C. diff is active and enforced hand washing by all medical and cleaning personnel in these healthcare settings. Also, adding that wearing gloves does not offer protection unless the gloves are removed properly. Proper glove-changing protocol involves removing the gloves without ever actually touching contaminated areas of the glove.

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## Tough to Kill

In addition to proper hand-washing and glove-changing procedures, the most effective way to stop the spread of C. diff is more thorough, hygienic cleaning. However, unlike MRSA, which can be removed from surfaces using proper cleaning systems and disinfectants, C. diff has proved to be much more difficult to remove.

“The [C. diff] spores, by their very nature, are designed to protect and provide [for] the spread of the organism,” says Sheldon. “Complicating matters, traditional quaternary and even EPA-registered phenolic disinfectants are not effective against this pathogen,” according to the EPA.

More problems arise because some chemical manufacturers’ kill claims regarding C. diff, which are backed by the EPA, are applicable only when the bacteria is in its less common vegetative state.

“But once it has entered its [more common] spore-form stage, these products are ineffective,” explains Sheldon.

## Mechanical Measures

Looking for ways to eradicate C. diff spores and promote more healthful, hygienic cleaning, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests using a bleach and water combination along with “mechanical methods of soil removal.”

Although the use of bleach may not be the most environmentally preferable choice, the seriousness of the disease and the fact that its victims are often older people with weaker immune systems warrants its use.

If bleach and water are used, Sheldon suggests that maintenance staff flood the surfaces to be cleaned and then remove the solution through drains or with a wet/dry vacuum system. They should then use microfiber cleaning cloths to wipe clean the surfaces, utilizing a fresh cloth or a fresh area of the cleaning cloth for each surface. Recently, a new form of microfiber cleaning cloth was introduced that can be folded into a number of quadrants.

This way, the cleaning technician can use a fresh quadrant for each surface with less waste.

As to using mechanical methods of soil removal, Sheldon suggest the use of spray and-vac cleaning technology or high-flow fluid extraction. With this system, technicians apply a disinfectant to surfaces to be cleaned. “The high-pressure rinse forces soil and contaminants to the floor, where they are removed with the machine’s wet vacuum,” he explains. “This technology has proved to be effective for soil and spore removal.”

**With all the talk about germs and diseases such as C. diff, MRSA, SARS, and others, it is no wonder that many people are becoming germaphobic. Germs are all around us, but in most cases, our natural immunities protect us from them.**

**However, some germs, such as C. diff, can cause serious illness for even the most healthy among us, and, as referenced earlier, they especially impact those with the weakest immune systems. By implementing the procedures discussed here, along with more hygienic cleaning and some good old common sense, we can substantially reduce the spread of these dangerous diseases. □**

## C. Diff on the Rise

None of us lives in a bubble—germs are everywhere. But the vast majority of germs, even in hospitals, are essentially harmless. Generally speaking, most of these germs either have no impact on our lives or are actually beneficial, helping to clean up waste and pollution.

C. diff bacteria, however, are more dangerous because they can produce toxins that attack the human body. C. diff can be treated successfully with antibiotics, but they must be the right antibiotics or sometimes the right combination of antibiotics. However, the overuse of antibiotics in recent years has made it more difficult to treat this disease, which is why it has become more prevalent and even, in some cases, fatal.

