

# Dozens in hospitals killed by little-known infection

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An infection resistant to virtually all antibiotics has lingered for more than a year in Montreal and Calgary hospitals and killed dozens of patients.

While there is no agreement on the number of deaths, one estimate puts it at 79.

The disease is not on a list of illnesses hospitals are required to report. News of it emerged yesterday in a medical journal.

At McGill University Health Centre, which has five hospitals in Montreal, 36 people have died from the infection. Calgary had a major outbreak in 2000-2001, but has had no deaths.

By comparison, severe acute re-

spiratory syndrome killed 44 people in Canada last year.

Researchers say the cause of the outbreak, which unlike SARS is contained in hospitals, might be a new, more powerful strain of a well-known bacteria, *Clostridium difficile*.

A germ that is resistant to virtually all antibiotics and gives patients severe diarrhea, it produces a toxin in the gut that can damage the colon and be fatal.

"Starting in December, 2002, we started getting patients requiring critical care because of *C. difficile*," said Sandra Dial, a physician who works in intensive-care at Montreal's Jewish General Hospital. "There was clearly something different."

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In her previous nine years of practice, she saw one case. Last year, she treated 20.

Isabelle Rocher, a Montreal nurse, said her 80-year-old mother, Suzanne Cloutier-Rocher, died a month after surgery last fall at St-Luc Hospital for an intestinal cyst.

Ms. Rocher was told the hospital had a wing of *C. difficile* patients. She said her mother and others were unable even to drink liquids.

Up to 79 deaths could be attributed to the infection, according to a survey of several Montreal hospitals in an article in the Canadian Medical Association journal.

Other physicians, such as Vivian Loo, director of infection prevention at the McGill University Health Centre, say the figure is too high and that a distinction should be made between patients who die because of *C. difficile* and those who die with it.

"If you look at what's happening in Montreal, it raises concern about people going into a hospital setting," said Donald Low, chief microbiologist at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital.

Dr. Low said *C. difficile* is not on the list of diseases hospitals need to report provincial or federal authorities know about. However, he added, physicians and hospitals must report severe or unusual outbreaks.

The problem might have been worsened by the common use of heartburn medications known as proton pump inhibitors, or PPIs.

Dr. Dial says in the CMAJ.

The key, Dr. Low said, is for doctors and nurses to keep the hospital environment clean and inform patients of proper hand-washing procedures. Also, he said hospitals should reduce use of antibiotics.

Both Dr. Dial and Ms. Rocher said the public should know about the outbreak.

Others were more cautious. "I think they are trying to tar Montreal and Calgary with the same brush in terms of being out of control," said Dr. Tom Louie, the Calgary Health Region's medical director for infection prevention and control. "We're not out of control. We've seen an increased number of cases."

Over the past three years, Calgary hospitals have reported 1,187 cases, but no deaths, with a major outbreak in 2000-2001. Incidences of *C. difficile* jumped at the end of last year and have been rising during the past three months, he said.

In Calgary, the health region warned medical personnel about the prevalence of the bacteria and to consider it when prescribing medication, Dr. Louie said.

"Patients on [PPIs] are less able to defend against it [the bacteria] because your stomach acidity is one of your important lines of defence against bacteria," Dr. Dial said.

Toronto hospitals have had patients with *C. difficile*, but not as many as Montreal or Calgary, Dr. Low said. Patients have died because of it, but they had other medical problems as well.

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