

A deadly ill that thrives on silence

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) recent announcement that infections and deaths from *Clostridium difficile* are twice as prevalent as long estimated is a revelation.

Drawing on data from New York hospitals, along with nine other states and veterans' facilities, it indicates that pain and loss of loved ones from this largely preventable disease touch hundreds of thousands of Americans.

But this disease gives a whole new meaning to quiet killer. Because *C. diff.* infections spread through feces and food, and its symptoms involve diarrhea, its very existence triggers squeamish silence. Who wants to talk about poop in public?

Yet stopping a disease that claims 29,000 lives a year requires us to.

One American contracts a *C. diff.* infection every minute, half a million annually. One death from the disease registers every 18 minutes, rivaling mortality from firearms and traffic accidents in the U.S.

Honesty and smart prevention strategies must replace shame. When my mother passed away from *C. diff.* five years ago this month, I had not heard of the disease. Nothing we do now together can bring my mom back to life. But well-informed, strategic efforts that combine public resources and private expertise can galvanize discussion of *C. diff.* and give hundreds of people harmed by the disease facts and context for preventing it.

C. diff. is a kind of bacteria that other bacteria in the human gut usually keep in check. But commonly prescribed antibiotics can knock out that counterbalance, allowing *C. diff.* to proliferate and shut down the intestine, inflicting bloating and painful diarrhea on patients. Hospitals and long-term care settings, the same settings where antibiotics abound, are where human waste, undisinfected surfaces, and bacteria-laden utensils and cups spread the disease.

CDC's declaration that preventing *C. diff.* is a national priority shows leadership. Treating this epidemic

involves a battery of programs, from research, to incentives for bleach-based cleaners that actually kill *C. diff.* on floors and tables, to a new clearinghouse on *C. diff.* infection strains and particular treatments to counteract them.

Openness by ordinary Americans is a powerful antidote, too, one that would allow thousands with chronic conditions stemming from *C. diff.*, such as toxic megacolon, to come out of the shadows.

Candor even expands access to fecal transplants, which are saving lives. And it enhances symptom detection. How quickly an afflicted person, friends, family, and co-workers recognize the symptoms can be a matter of life and death. Like so many hundreds of others before and since her case, my mother did not know what had struck her. This otherwise healthy and hardworking kindergarten teacher died in just six days.

Beside prevention and awareness, America's medical system must curb the overuse of antibiotics. As much as 50 percent of antibiotics prescribed at hospitals is unnecessary. Some antibiotics suppress the very bacteria that would render *C. diff.* merely a nasty microbe the body can neutralize on its own. In both Britain and Canada, reducing antibiotic use has lowered *C. diff.* incidence.

As Americans have seen with AIDS and Ebola, we need federal government commitment at its smartest to meet the *C. diff.* challenge. Through online evaluation of patients' exposure to *C. diff.* at health care institutions found on the [CMS Hospital Compare](#) site, or the series of steps the CDC is implementing, we see the federal government getting in gear. State agencies and local health care institutions, both government-run and private, need to do the same.

So must the public. Let's talk about *C. diff.* As a previous generation of bold activists pronounced, silence plays a pivotal role in deaths from this epidemic. In the face of *C. diff.*, informed dialog can break the lethal grip of ignorance and embarrassment, galvanize intervention and innovation, and preempt incalculable grief.

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<http://www.timesunion.com/tuplus-opinion/article/A-deadly-ill-that-thrives-on-silence-6190181.php>