
British hospitals are still dangerous

By editor

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Ten times as many elderly patients are killed by the hospital superbug *Clostridium difficile* in the UK than in any other country, a medical expert has claimed.

Around 6,500 people die of *C. difficile* in British hospitals every year – a rate of one an hour – and the infection kills four times more people than MRSA.

"The figures for *C. diff* show that more than 50 per cent of hospital trusts in the UK have a rate of infection that's more than 10 times that of any other country," said Professor Richard James, of Nottingham University's Institute of Infections, Immunity and Inflammation. "If you look at the over-65s, we have more cases there, and therefore more deaths in that age-group than any country in the world by a factor of 10."

He made his comments to the BBC's Panorama programme, which used the Freedom of Information Act to uncover the figures for an edition investigating *C. difficile* infection rates.

The Department of Health denied Panorama's claims, and said there was no evidence that the UK had a significantly higher *C. difficile* death rate. The department said infection rates for over-65s had fallen by 23 per cent year on year. "We are not aware of any evidence that mortality is significantly higher in the UK," said a spokeswoman.

"Tackling *C. diff* is a top priority for the NHS and the Government."

Panorama claimed that changes in the way the figures are counted means true infection rates are substantially higher. Researchers asked every acute hospital trust and health board in the UK for its figures and, of those that replied, more than half had bed occupancy rates of over 85 per cent.

"Experts would say that if you go above 85 per cent bed occupancy rates, then that is not conducive to good control of infection measures," Professor James told Panorama.

Professor Brendan Wren, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, added: "The deaths of 6,500 people a year is the equivalent of one person dying every hour in our hospitals."

Ann Keen, Health Services minister, said: "NHS staff have worked extremely hard to drive down numbers of infections and I'm pleased to see significant reductions compared to the previous year. However, one case of avoidable infection is one too many. I am challenging the NHS to make full use of the resources at their disposal to eradicate avoidable infections."

Source: S.Gray, The Independent website, on 31 IV 2008,