

## **Prisoners, guards fear for health**

### **Staph infection scare is overblown, officials say**

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Prisoners are wiping down doorknobs with bleach. Guards are wearing plastic gloves whenever they touch anything inside a cell. And inmates are telling other inmates to go see a doctor when a rash shows up on their skin.

Within the walls of Alaska prisons rumors are rampant about the dangers of a drug-resistant bacteria that can cause painful and potentially dangerous skin infections. But medical staff in the facilities say worries about the staph infection MRSA are overblown and want prisoners and guards to halt what they call misinformation.

"This is a mirror image of society's response to HIV when it first came into existence," said Roger Hale, a physician's assistant at Palmer Correctional Facility for more than 20 years. "Ignorance causes a lot of confusion and fear."

The state Department of Corrections says there have been no documented cases of deaths from MRSA. Cases of infections occur, but that is to be expected in a population generally weakened by illness as most prisoners are, said Dr. Henry Luban, the department's medical director. Only one prison guard reported it, and that was in 2006, said deputy director of institutions Bryan Brandenburg.

The correction officers' union, though, says the infection is growing among inmates, spreading to guards, and has even killed two prisoners.

The prisons have protocol to deal with issues of inmates with contagious infections, Luban said. All prisoners are screened by a nurse. If an MRSA case is identified by medical staff at any point during the inmate's stay, it is addressed immediately.

MRSA is shorthand for staph infections that do not respond to certain antibiotics. While staph is a bacteria commonly found on the skin and in the nose of healthy people, when it gets into the body, usually through a wound, it can cause an infection. When that infection doesn't respond to first-line antibiotics, it can be dangerous, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control.

The main means of transmission is through skin contact. It can be minor or fatal, starting as a boil and ending up a blood infection or pneumonia.

MRSA is a problem not only for prisons but for hospitals, nursing homes, locker rooms and other places with tight living quarters. It is worse when the population is weakened by illness or is unhygienic.

#### PERSPECTIVE

Luban said Corrections does not track cases of MRSA, and state epidemiologist Dr. Beth Funk said it is uncertain how widespread it is in Alaska. While it has been increasing over the past several decades and the list of antibiotics it resists has grown, it is usually treatable with other kinds of antibiotics.

"When there's something like this -- whether it's HIV, MRSA, an oral virus, Hep C -- they can sound really scary. So you talk to people about the risks and you put it in perspective and relate it to the other risks they face every day," Funk said. "And, day to day, it's not something I worry about."

"I'm more worried about colds, flus, oral viruses," she said.

#### PANIC

Despite what medical personnel say, managers of state prisons are coming under fire by prisoners and guards who are worried.

"Prisoners are panic-stricken," said Palmer inmate Louis Martinez. He now opens doors with his sleeve.

On Tuesday, the Alaska Correctional Officers Association issued a vote of no confidence against Commissioner Joe Schmidt. One of their grievances was management's response to what they see as a major MRSA problem.

Sgt. Randy McLellan, a union representative who works at Mat-Su Pre-Trial, says the MRSA problem is spreading. He described one prisoner with such a bad infection around his eye that it closed shut. He blames overcrowding and says living conditions are unsanitary.

"There are guys in here who have worn the same clothes for a week because there weren't enough to go around," he said. "The problem of MRSA has just gotten bigger and bigger."

Prison officials agree there is an overcrowding problem. That's why a new 1,500-bed, \$250 million Point MacKenzie prison is planned. But, they say, infections will always be an issue in the close quarters of a jail, especially when so many people cycle in and out.

Gordon Fletcher, another guard at Mat-Su Pre-Trial, said he sees MRSA at the facility. Two prisoners were kept out of the kitchen recently because they had it, he said. Inmates who developed what they thought were spider bites, probably had MRSA, he said.

Corrections officer David Talbert, at the Palmer prison, said, "I'm careful. I wear my gloves for everything. ... Every time I have skin contact with a prisoner or even touch their stuff."

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## **MRSA**

Methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus infections have caused about 94,000 life-threatening infections and 19,000 deaths in the U.S. in 2005.

### **Symptoms**

Pimples, rashes, pus-filled boils

Possible high fever, swelling, heat and pain around wound, headache, fatigue

Could lead to more serious infections, bloodstream infections, pneumonia

### **Prevention**

Avoid skin-to-skin contact or sharing towels and linens with infected person

Keep wounds covered, clean

### **Treatment**

Can be treated with some antibiotics

Incision and drainage

*Sources: Journal of the American Medical Association, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Massachusetts Health Department*

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Bottom of Form