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An Epidemic of Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* Soft Tissue Infections Among Medically Underserved Patients

A high prevalence of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) in soft tissue infections presents a treatment challenge. Young and co-investigators from the San Francisco General Hospital conducted a retrospective analysis in the San Francisco General Hospital Integrated Soft Tissue Infection (ISIS) Clinic with patients treated at the clinic from July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2003. Information on patient demographics, surgical procedures, microbiologic studies, and antibiotic treatments was obtained for all patients treated in the ISIS Clinic. Microbial data and antibiotic susceptibility pattern of *S. aureus*, treatment outcome, and antibiotic prescribed were analyzed for all evaluable patients. The ISIS Clinic treated 6,156 unique patients for 12,012 episodes of infection. In this cohort, 5,164 (84%) either were homeless or had no health insurance. More than half of the patients (58%) were injection drug users, but most had only 1 prior visit to the clinic (62%). Patients underwent a surgical procedure 7,707 times (64%). Among the 837 positive cultures, *S. aureus* was recovered 695 times (83%), and 525 (63%) of the cultures contained MRSA. Therefore, a full 76% of all *S. aureus* isolated was MRSA. In a subset analysis of 622 cultures performed prospectively for consecutive patients, 282 (45%) grew organisms, of which 256 (91%) were *S. aureus*. MRSA represented 59% of all *S. aureus* isolated. Homelessness and injection drug use were risk factors for infection by *S. aureus* and MRSA. In another subgroup of patients with soft tissue infections that required admission to the hospital, MRSA was recovered from the cultures of 149 patients. Of these patients with MRSA, 44 (30%) received only a beta-lactam antibiotic, inactive against MRSA, and had full resolution of their infection. The authors concluded that the prevalence of MRSA soft tissue infections in the medically underserved ISIS Clinic cohort was extremely high and involved transmission in the community. Antibiotic therapy directed at MRSA was considered unnecessary in many patients with soft tissue infections. Studies to identify the source and cause of the outbreak are needed, as are trials of antibiotic therapy for such soft tissue infections.

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