

Hospitals' Nightmare

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You need your knees replaced, and you have a choice of two venues. One is an august teaching hospital, nonprofit, run by worthy types and very egalitarian. It takes rich and poor, young and old, strapping and debilitated patients. The other option is a spanking-new for-profit venture down the street that specializes in joints. Its patients are young, healthy and insured, and its rate of postsurgical infections is half that of the big general hospital.

Big hospitals ought to be losing competitions like this all the time. But, desperate to keep upstarts from siphoning off their most desirable patients, they are getting laws passed to stomp out the specialty hospital business. (Ostensible reason: Doctors should not be motivated by profit.) Established providers are also blocking rules that would compel disclosure of infection rates. It's a nasty fight. David Whelan describes it in his article ['Bad Medicine'](#).

If the result of this donnybrook is that all hospitals clean up their acts, it will be a victory for patients. It will also be a victory for one Elizabeth McCaughey, crusader for hospital sanitation. She's something of a monomaniac, but she's right. Big hospitals are breeding grounds for drug-resistant staph, pseudomonas and C. diff bacteria. Many thousands of people die as a result.

You can't visit an industrial hog barn or a semiconductor plant without donning a bunny suit. Why do hospitals let doctors, orderlies and visitors slosh bacteria around with every footstep? Why don't patients rate as much hygiene as a pig or a videogame chip?

Betsy McCaughey fights dirty. She collects horror stories at hospitalinfection.org. She's talking about tort suits to teach the medical establishment a lesson. "Hospital infection is the next asbestos," she declares. She tells insurers to cancel liability policies at hospitals where doctors don't wash their hands. You can see why this impolitic ex-lieutenant governor did not last long as a politician.

McCaughey's forerunner in the 19th century was the physician Ignaz Semmelweis. He said puerperal fever, which killed mothers in childbirth, was spread by dirty doctors. He called them murderers. They had him thrown in a madhouse, where he died young. Let's hope she fares better. Your life may depend on it.