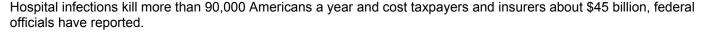# Expert: End of hospital infections possible

By Andrew Conte

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Hospital infections kill more than 90,000 Americans a year and cost taxpayers and insurers about $45 billion, federal officials have reported.

That can change, said Dr. Keith Kanel, chief medical officer at **Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative**, a nonprofit that seeks to improve health care practices.

With training and close adherence to protocols and checklists, he said, hospitals can stop infections.

"I think we're going to see continued progress at eliminating hospital-acquired infections, and there's no question the goal is getting to zero," Kanel said.

Curbing infections can mean big money for hospitals and equipment manufacturers. Each catheter-related infection costs between $3,700 and $29,000, according to PRHI estimates.

In Pennsylvania, hospitals charged more than $1.25 billion in 2009 to treat patients readmitted for complications or infections that might have been avoided, the Tribune-Review's "Code Green: Bleeding Dollars" investigation found.

Patients across the state were readmitted to the hospital more than 62,000 times in 2010 because of complications or infections, according to the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council. The cases represent 5.6 percent of hospital stays.

Solutions can be simple. Something as easy as mandated hand-washing can make a difference, Kanel said. A four-year PRHI study found that bloodstream infection rates fell by 68 percent when measures were implemented and followed.

And the results have been sustained.

"This was HUGE," Kanel wrote in an email.

As incentive, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in 2008 stopped paying hospitals for some types of readmissions that might have been prevented, such as catheter-associated infections. Private health insurers typically adopt federal payment practices.

Researchers wrote in The New England Journal of Medicine in October that they could find no evidence that the change in payment policy had an effect. But hospital officials — including those with UPMC and West Penn Allegheny Health System — said they take seriously the issue of reducing infections.

Into that environment, Flexicath, an Israeli company with North American headquarters in South Park, has introduced a catheter designed to prevent patients from being infected with airborne and touch-borne pathogens.

The company has grown to a dozen employees since 2010 and started distribution in the East and Midwest, said James "Chip" Hanlon, chief operating officer.

"The neatest thing is when we sell our product," Hanlon said. "What we find is that the clinicians typically understand the advantages."

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