1 **Rising Stakes for Healthcare-Associated Infection Prevention: Implications for the**
2 **Clinical Microbiology Laboratory (REVISED)**
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4 Daniel J. Diekema, MD
5 Departments of Internal Medicine and Pathology
6 University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine
7 Iowa City, IA
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13 Corresponding author:
14 Daniel J. Diekema, MD
15 SW-54 General Hospital, 200 Hawkins Drive
16 Iowa City, IA 52242
17 Phone: 319-356-7740 Fax: 319-356-4600
18 e-mail: daniel-diekema@uiowa.edu
19

Abstract:

Healthcare associated infection (HAI) rates are subject to public reporting, and are linked to hospital reimbursement from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The increasing pressure to lower HAI rates comes at a time when advances in the clinical microbiology laboratory (CML) provide more precise and sensitive tests, altering HAI detection in ways that may increase reported HAI rates. I review how changing CML practices can impact HAI rates, and how the financial implications of HAI metrics may produce pressure to change diagnostic testing practices. Finally, I provide suggestions for how to respond to this rapidly changing environment.

Scenario 1. During an investigation of rising rates of central-line associated bloodstream infection (CLABSI), the infection prevention program (IPP) notes that some CLABSIs were due to organisms that grew in only one of several blood cultures, and which prior to the institution of matrix-assisted laser desorption/ ionization time of flight (MALDI-TOF) for organism identification would have been classified as contaminants. An example included a CLABSI attributed to an unusual species of *Actinomyces* that previously would have been categorized as a “diphtheroid”. Your hospital leadership requests that you either revert to former identification methods or change your reporting in a way that prevents these events from being classified as CLABSIs.

Scenario 2. Since you changed to a nucleic acid amplification test (NAAT) for *Clostridium difficile* detection, your positivity rate has increased by over 100%. The rate of hospital-onset *C. difficile* infection (HO-CDI) has increased similarly. During an investigation of the increase in CDI, you find that many samples positive by NAAT are toxin negative by enzyme immunoassay (EIA), and that many patients with low pretest probability of disease are being tested. However, after an initiative to improve testing

practices, your hospital-onset CDI Lab ID-event rate remains high (standardized infection ratio (SIR) >1). Concerned about how this rate will impact the value-based purchasing (VBP) and healthcare-associated condition (HAC) scores, your hospital leadership asks you to consider a change back to EIA for CDI diagnosis.

Scenario 3. Even after a campaign to reduce your hospital's rate of catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI) through a reduction in catheter use and improvement in catheter placement and care, the CAUTI rate remains unacceptably high. Your hospital epidemiologist sets up a meeting with you, to discuss how to reduce the number of urine cultures ordered or performed by the laboratory, as another way to reduce both the CAUTI rate and unnecessary antibiotic use. She is open to almost any idea to reduce culture ordering, from using "reflex testing" (culture only performed when urinalysis reveals evidence for inflammation) to requiring laboratory director approval for every urine culture ordered from catheterized inpatients.

Pay for Performance and Healthcare Associated Infections

The above scenarios are all based upon actual situations confronted by clinical microbiologists in practice. In each case, the laboratory was asked to change its testing approach in order to reduce the number of cases meeting a current National Healthcare Safety Network (NHSN) HAI definition (1). There is no question that a renewed focus on HAI reduction in U.S. hospitals is being driven in part by the relationship between HAI rates and hospital reimbursement via the VBP and HAC-reduction programs (2, 3). Both the VBP and HAC-reduction programs are administered by CMS in an effort to link hospital payments to improvements in quality of care (2, 3). Table 1 describes characteristics of each of these pay for performance programs, with a focus on the HAI metrics that are included. All told, up to 3% of CMS payments are at risk, which can amount to millions of dollars for a large medical center. Despite recent studies that

suggest VBP and HAC measures are not good indicators of hospital quality (4, 5), these programs (or something similar) are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Of the five HAI metrics included in the VBP and HAC programs, four of them (CAUTI, CLABSI, CDI, and hospital-onset methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) bloodstream infection) depend heavily on the results of a diagnostic test performed in the CML. For two of the metrics (CDI and MRSA), the NHSN definition includes only the positive test result, the admission date and unit ("Laboratory identified (LabID) events" for CDI and MRSA bacteremia), with no additional patient-level clinical information (6). In an effort to reduce subjectivity and facilitate electronic reporting, future definition changes will likely rely more on objective results from electronic medical records, such as laboratory test results, with less emphasis on clinical symptoms.

Unintended Consequences for the Clinical Microbiology Laboratory

At the same time, diagnostic technology is improving, allowing for greater precision and sensitivity than ever before (7). These advances, while they have great potential to improve patient care and outcomes, may also have the effect of increasing reportable HAI rates. In Scenario 1 above, the greater precision in species identification provided by MALDI-TOF may change the classification of some positive blood cultures from contaminants to CLABSIs. The most common scenario leading to this result is the finding of one blood culture positive (out of two or more) for an organism that can now be identified to species level that previously would have been reported out using less precise terminology (e.g. "diphtheroid"). In such cases, if the organism identified is not on the NHSN list of common commensals, but the genus is included in the "all organisms" list, the episode counts as a CLABSI (8). In Scenario 2 above, the increased sensitivity of *C. difficile* NAAT results in a predictable increase in CDI rates of 50% or more (9, 10). Although NHSN includes a "test method" variable in the risk adjustment

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formula for HO-CDI rate calculations (11), the risk adjustment is clearly not adequate to fully account for the increased sensitivity of NAAT. For example, at our center we used an algorithm for CDI testing that allowed us to determine that our Standardized Infection Ratio (SIR) using NAAT is nearly twice what it would be if we used EIA alone (0.95 versus 0.5) (12).

In an environment in which the stakes of each HAI are so high, and in which the only acceptable HAI rate is zero, inclusion of diagnostic test results into HAI definitions creates perverse incentives for hospitals to influence laboratory testing for reasons not directly related to improved patient care. One incentive, as outlined above, is to choose less sensitive tests (e.g. EIA rather than NAAT for CDI diagnosis), which has the obvious drawback of failing to diagnose some patients who would benefit from treatment. Another incentive is to reduce the number of diagnostic tests ordered. In Scenario 3, for example, the lab director is faced with choosing the best option for limiting the ordering of urine cultures in catheterized inpatients, as part of an effort to reduce the CAUTI rate.

Reducing diagnostic test utilization may not always be detrimental to patient care; indeed, improved stewardship of diagnostic tests can benefit the patient as well as assist in reducing reported HAI rates. The best example of this is CAUTI. Many institutions have reported success in CAUTI reduction via approaches that have the effect of reducing the number of urine cultures ordered or performed (13-15). In some cases the interventions include application of guideline-driven culture practices (13, 15), while in other cases “reflex testing” involves culturing urine only if evidence of inflammation is found on urinalysis (UA) (14). Because most positive urine cultures in catheterized patients represent catheter-associated asymptomatic bacteriuria (CA-ASB) and not CAUTI, because most CA-ASB doesn’t progress to CAUTI (16), and because there are so many other causes of fever in hospitalized patients, reducing urine culture ordering in

120 catheterized inpatients is a laudable goal and can both reduce the NHSN-defined CAUTI
121 rate and reduce unnecessary antibiotic use (14, 15). The same principle (restricting test
122 ordering to those patients with the highest pre-test probability of disease) can and should
123 be applied to CDI testing. Rather than adopting less sensitive tests for CDI, the CML
124 director should work with clinical partners to implement policies to limit more sensitive
125 (e.g. NAAT) testing to those truly at risk (e.g. antibiotic exposure, frequent liquid stools,
126 etc.). Up to half of hospitalized patients tested for CDI don't have significant diarrhea,
127 and over 40% in some studies were receiving laxatives (17). Testing patients with low
128 pre-test probability of CDI thus increases the likelihood that a positive test represents *C.*
129 *difficile* colonization rather than disease (18, 19). As for CAUTI, limiting test ordering for
130 CDI may not only reduce NHSN-defined HAI rates but may improve patient care and
131 improve antibiotic stewardship (18, 19).

132 In other situations, efforts to limit diagnostic testing may be misguided and detrimental to
133 patient care. In an effort to lower their CAUTI rate, one hospital implemented a policy of
134 treating all catheterized patients with a third generation cephalosporin if their UA
135 revealed inflammatory cells, performing culture only if signs and symptoms developed
136 later (personal communication). A recent publication from a different healthcare system
137 quotes a house officer describing their approach to a possible CLABSI: "There's like the
138 central line infection protocols…. If you suspect that anybody has any type of
139 bacteremia, you don't do a blood culture, you just do a urine culture and pull the lines …
140 we just don't even test for it because the quality improvement then like marks you off"
141 (20). These limitations on diagnostic testing are obviously inappropriate and dangerous,
142 subjecting the patient to unnecessary antibiotic therapy, misdiagnosis, or worse. The
143 CDC and CMS have heard enough reports similar to those described above that they
144 jointly published a letter warning to hospitals that "depart[ing] from standard diagnostic

practices to avoid reporting infections to NHSN" can "put patients at risk", leading to "use of antibiotics that is not necessary, such as treatment for bacterial colonization rather than infection, or antibiotic treatment that is not informed by culture results" (21).

At the other end of the diagnostic testing spectrum, some hospitals have established protocols that include ordering tests upon admission in patients who have no signs or symptoms of an infection. Examples include ordering urine culture or *C. difficile* NAAT on all admitted patients, in order to detect asymptomatic bacteriuria or the *C. difficile* carrier state. This ostensibly allows the hospital to claim that any subsequent infection was present on admission and thus not reportable to NHSN as a HAI (21). Needless to say, these practices also increase risk to patients by exposing some to unnecessary antibiotic therapy, in addition to increasing hospital costs. Such approaches also belie a fundamental misunderstanding of HAI surveillance and prevention. Most HAIs are due to organisms that are part of the patient's flora prior to the infection, and the fact that an organism colonizes a patient's urine, stool or nares doesn't mean the hospital isn't responsible for preventing it from later causing disease.

Finally, even in the absence of attempts to change practices in order to lower HAI rates, there is substantial background variation in diagnostic practice that makes inter-facility comparison (which is what the VBP and HAC programs are based upon) problematic. One study of 16 pediatric intensive care units found major differences across units in several aspects of diagnosis of CLABSI, including basic blood culture practices (e.g. volume, number, sites, frequency). The investigators then devised a "surveillance aggressiveness score", which (unsurprisingly) correlated with the units CLABSI rate ("the harder you look, the more you find") (22). As described above, these diagnostic practice variations become even more problematic when public reporting and financial penalties are introduced into the HAI prevention equation. As described by Dixon-Woods and

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Perencevich, “policy moves have converted a locally useful surveillance measure into what social scientists call a “reactive” measure: the kind of measure that modifies the phenomenon under study and in the process changes the thing being measured. Put bluntly, the more that organizations are incentivized by the prospect of shaming or financial penalties to decrease sensitivity—and thus not to find cases—the less certain it is that they are reporting a valid assessment of their infection rate” (23).

The Use and Misuse of Surveillance Definitions

It is useful to step back and consider the main purpose for which hospitals and healthcare systems perform HAI surveillance, which is to help inform local infection prevention efforts. Some important attributes of a good surveillance definition include the use of objective data when possible, high inter-rater reliability, and consistent application over time (24). Sensitivity is favored over specificity, so as not to miss potentially preventable events, and some degree of misclassification is expected (which will even out over time, provided the definitions are applied consistently). Ideally, the data produced from such surveillance would be used at the local level to detect outbreaks, to measure changes that result from new HAI prevention initiatives, and to help set HAI prevention priorities during annual risk assessments.

Unfortunately, financial penalties based upon inter-facility comparisons place a great deal of pressure on HAI surveillance metrics, which changes the metrics by distorting the incentives associated with them. This phenomenon is not limited to the healthcare setting. Whenever extreme pressure (in the form of financial rewards or penalties) is placed on a metric, human nature guarantees that complications will follow—recent well-publicized examples include widespread gaming that occurs when law enforcement is under pressure to lower crime rates (25), or when teachers are under pressure to

improve student test scores (26). This phenomenon is known as Goodhart's law: "when a measure become a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (23, 27, 28).

Thus one could argue that the best solution to this problem is to no longer tie inter-facility comparisons of HAI rates to financial penalties. However, understandable consumer and payer pressure to improve patient safety make this outcome unlikely. Therefore, as clinical microbiologists we need to adjust to this high-pressure environment in a way that limits unintended adverse consequences.

Recommendations

I offer the following suggestions for approaching this high stakes environment:

(1) **CML leadership should select diagnostic approaches with the goal of improving individual patient outcomes**. At times this will align with efforts to reduce reportable HAI rates (e.g. reducing urine cultures among catheterized inpatients, limiting CDI testing to those with high pretest probability of disease), and at other times it will not (e.g. introduction of MALDI-TOF for organism identification, adoption of NAAT for CDI detection).

(2) **Hospital and IPP leadership should not pressure the CML to alter diagnostic practices based on the need to demonstrate lower HAI rates for pay-for-performance measures**. Regulatory and accrediting agencies (e.g. CMS, state agencies, Joint Commission) likewise should be alert to changes in diagnostic practice that are associated with changes in HAI rates.

(3) **Public health authorities (CDC/NHSN) must be proactive in adjusting HAI metrics to changing CML technology**. For example, rapid updating of the master organism lists used by NHSN to define commensals is needed to "catch up" to the increased precision offered by MALDI-TOF. Similarly, measures that are driven by

diagnostic test results require risk adjustment when new technology is introduced that changes test performance significantly. Tertiary care teaching hospitals are often the earliest adopters of such technology, putting them at a disadvantage in inter-facility comparisons that are used in pay-for-performance programs.

(4) **CMS should reconsider the use of "Laboratory Identified (LabID) event" metrics in pay-for-performance programs.** Such metrics do not take into account any clinical information beyond admission date and location, may vary substantially based upon the diagnostic technology applied, and for non-sterile sites may conflate colonization with disease. Although they have the advantage of being less labor-intensive and more objective, they are still subject to gaming and to inter-facility variation in diagnostic practice.

(5) **Measures of "diagnostic aggressiveness" should be developed and validated for selected HAIs**. For example, rates of blood culture utilization and other aspects of blood culture practice might help inform the adjustment of CLABSI rates for inter-facility comparison. Alternatively, diagnostic-test independent clinical syndromes could be further developed and validated. For example, the rate of healthcare-associated clinical sepsis or SIRS might help interpret the significance of changes in CLABSI rate. If a hospital reduced its CLABSI rate by 90% but saw no change in healthcare-associated sepsis or SIRS events, the implication is that the change in CLABSI may be related to changes in diagnostic aggressiveness or application of surveillance definitions.

(6) **CML leadership should be represented on the infection prevention committee, and should advocate for the CML as an integral part of the infection prevention program**. Only by closely collaborating with the infection prevention program can CML leadership inform the IPP and hospital leaders regarding the impact of changing diagnostic practices on reportable HAI rates. In so doing they can also explain any

unintended adverse consequences that may arise from attempts to reduce reportable HAI events via changes in diagnostic practices.

In conclusion, the CML is an essential partner in the diagnosis, management and prevention of healthcare-associated infections (29). Increased pressure to improve HAI prevention metrics (for inter-facility comparison and pay-for-performance) must never interfere with optimal diagnostic strategies. Close collaboration between the CML, the IPP, and hospital leadership, along with some adjustments to current HAI definitions and pay-for-performance programs, can help ensure that the focus remains firmly on the patient, and can provide confidence that declining HAI rates are indeed a reflection of safer care.

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Table. Characteristics of programs that tie reimbursement to HAI metrics, FY 2017

Program	Money at risk	Incentive possible?	HAIs included
Value based purchasing (VBP)	2% of payments	Yes, program reallocates funds from low to high performers	CAUTI CLABSI SSI (colon/hyst)* *C. difficile* infection** MRSA bacteremia**
Hospital acquired condition (HAC) reduction	1% of payments	No, penalty only, for worst quartile	CAUTI CLABSI SSI (colon/hyst)* *C. difficile* infection** MRSA bacteremia**

*SSI: surgical site infection (SSI) rates for colon surgery and abdominal hysterectomy

**metric is the NHSN LabID event