

COVER: Not Just Washing Their Hands

A family in mourning tries to make hospitals safer

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If you've noticed more and more stores equipping shoppers with hand-sanitizing gel or wet wipes, you've noticed a trend in fighting easily spread disease.

It's not that we are more paranoid, though humans have endured epidemics and plagues beyond the scale of those visited on Egypt in the past several thousand years. The hand sanitizers may not seem like a lifeline, but Jewish Atlantans Victoria and Armando Nahum, the founders of the Safe Care Campaign (www.safecarecampaign.org), say they are the early steps to a more sanitary environment for everyone and fewer lives carelessly lost to germs.

Saving lives can be as basic as washing your hands, the Nahums say. That may sound simple, but even the Georgia Hospital Association has stepped up its campaign to spread awareness about the importance of hand-washing and hygiene for the health of patients.

The Nahums learned the lesson of hospital hygiene in the hardest way possible.

Josh Nahum, 27, Armando's son and Victoria's stepson, died in October from a series of infections he suffered while hospitalized.

A September skydiving accident in Colorado nearly killed Josh. With a broken thigh and a fractured skull, he was admitted to intensive care at a hospital near Boulder, Colo., and he made slow progress toward a full recovery, the Nahums said.

That's when staphylococcus bacteria infected Josh. An antibiotic knocked out that initial infection, but it was only one of the microscopic battles inside Josh's body. He was moved to a rehab facility to learn to walk again. After weeks of steady progress, Josh spiked a fever that sent him back to the intensive-care unit.

The culprit was a bacterium known as *Enterobacter aerogenes*. Victoria Nahum said Josh contracted the bug in the hospital.

After his temperature hit 103 degrees, Josh lapsed into a coma, became a ventilator-dependant quadriplegic and, less than two weeks later, died. He was a victim of what is known as an MSRA: methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.

"We just saw that in his medical records," Victoria Nahum said.

Josh became part of a daunting statistic in American medicine: the death toll caused by hospital-acquired infections. Studies estimate that 2 million Americans per year pick up infections in hospitals, and 100,000 people a year are killed by microbes that enter their bodies after they arrive at hospitals.

But the Nahums' story is not about sadness or hospital-bashing.

"I don't want to be another mother's story, crying in their hands - my heart goes out to them. I want people to know, so that when they enter the hospital, they can prepare," Victoria Nahum said. "I want it to be more than a sad story; it is a sad story."

Nahum's stepson was not the only one in her family affected by a hospital-acquired infection.

Her father-in-law, Quint Nahum, 75, contracted bacterial pneumonia after he had a small heart attack in 2005. He has fully recovered and does not blame the Rochester, N.Y., hospital for his illness. But Victoria Nahum has taken into consideration his infection as part of her Safe Care Campaign platform for safer hospital environments.

Nahum herself suffered six years of unexplained symptoms for which she sought relief. She said she went from running seven major radio stations to hardly being able to make her own bed. She was constantly exhausted, suffered from slight fevers all the time and could not figure out what was wrong. She had numbness and tingling from her elbows to her fingertips and from her knees to her toes.

She got diagnoses ranging from pre-menopause to hormone problems to

neuritis. She was put on the medication Neurontin to help with symptoms but still had no cure.

Nahum said her illness "reached critical mass" in 2005.

In 1999, when she still was living a vibrant and productive life in the radio industry, Nahum had breast augmentation surgery. She had no idea then about bacterial "biofilm" and how bacteria can live within a person for years.

Although no one had suspected the implants as the cause of her symptoms, Nahum said she was finally diagnosed with an auto-immune disease called Sjogren's that could have been triggered by the implants. Although her doctor told her that removing the implants would not reverse the disease, Nahum decided to have them taken out March 10, 2006.

"I promise you, I think I would have died had I not taken them out," she said during an interview at her Smyrna home.

To her doctor's surprise, Nahum's implants were covered in a sticky bacterial biofilm, staph epidermis.

The bacteria had planted themselves on top of the implants and, like an alien life form, fought hard to maintain their existence in Nahum's body.

"I wasn't properly prepped" for the augmentation surgery in 1999, Nahum said. Her hospital-acquired staph infection could have been prevented by proper prep, hand-washing and better awareness in the hospital.

Nahum said the triple strike of hospital infections against her family is not the result of any genetic predisposition or weakness in their immune systems. "We are not of the same bloodlines," she said, because Quint is her father-in-law and Josh was her stepson. "It's not a genetic anomaly."

She said four Americans per minute are catching hospital-acquired infections, and Armando said that until the death of his son, he was unaware of the dangers. "This is a worse problem than we know."

It's a problem that can be solved as easily as washing your hands, Victoria said. "It's so simple. We are in the age of technology; we want technology

to be our savior. We can grow sheep from a single cell, but we can't save ourselves from infection."

The Nahums are seeking change with their Safe Care Campaign.

Kathy McGowan, the director of quality and patient safety with the Georgia Hospital Association's Partnership for Health and Accountability, said Victoria Nahum approached the association in February.

"We were so moved by her story, and she kept asking us, 'What can I do to help hospitals prevent this from happening again?' " McGowan said.

On Feb. 22, the Georgia Hospital Association, with Nahum in tow, was at the state Capitol, lobbying for better practices against hospital-acquired infections and presenting its TIPS initiative. Teams for Infection Prevention Success is meant to bring all hospitals in the state into a single track of awareness and prevention for those infections.

"So many hospitals are doing good things now," McGowan said. "What we wanted to do was a refocus on a statewide level and emphasis."

TIPS should be beneficial for hospital staffers, who are constantly at risk of acquiring infections, as well as patients.

Nahum said she is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has been supportive of the Safe Care Campaign, and is trying to establish better awareness at hospitals about the importance of a sanitary environment and clean hands.

Nahum hopes to work on promotional videos with the CDC to educate hospital visitors about the importance of hand-washing. Nahum and McGowan said much of the information needed for public awareness seems like common sense, but people usually don't think about those things.

There are good bacteria in the body, such as those involved in the digestive process, but the Georgia Hospital Association and the Safe Care Campaign hope to create understanding of the transmission of bad bacteria.

Nahum uses the example of a person who goes to the grocery store and uses a shopping cart, picks up various items and handles money before visiting a hospital. He stops in the hospital restroom and doesn't wash his hands properly. He touches all the door handles and elevator buttons on the way to the room of a loved one, stopping by the community coffee pot to get a cup of coffee. He ends up in the room of the sick loved one.

Not only has he left a trail of germs on everything he touched, but hundreds or thousands of other people in that hospital are doing the same thing every day. The germs run together and are passed around haphazardly.

"Good hand hygiene will definitely reduce the risk of infection," McGowan said. "There is so much to hand hygiene; it's about being aware."