



Highlights of [GAO-08-673T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), health-care-associated infections (HAI)—infections that patients acquire while receiving treatment for other conditions—are estimated to be 1 of the top 10 causes of death in the nation. This statement summarizes a report issued in March and released today, *Health-Care-Associated Infections in Hospitals: Leadership Needed from HHS to Prioritize Prevention Practices and Improve Data on These Infections* ([GAO-08-283](#)). In this report, GAO examined (1) CDC's guidelines for hospitals to reduce or prevent HAIs and what HHS does to promote their implementation, (2) Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' (CMS) and hospital accrediting organizations' required standards for hospitals to reduce or prevent HAIs, and (3) HHS programs that collect data related to HAIs and integration of the data across HHS. To conduct the work, GAO reviewed documents and interviewed HHS agency and accrediting organization officials.

What GAO Recommends

In its report, GAO recommended that the Secretary of HHS identify priorities among the recommended practices in CDC's guidelines and establish greater consistency and compatibility of the data collected across HHS on HAIs. HHS generally agreed with GAO's recommendations. GAO also incorporated comments from the accrediting organizations as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-673T](#). For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7114 or bascettac@gao.gov.

HEALTH-CARE-ASSOCIATED INFECTIONS IN HOSPITALS

Leadership Needed from HHS to Prioritize Prevention Practices and Improve Data on These Infections

What GAO Found

In its March report, which is summarized in this statement, GAO found the following:

- CDC has 13 guidelines for hospitals on infection control and prevention, which contain almost 1,200 recommended practices, but activities across HHS to promote implementation of these practices are not guided by a prioritization of the practices. Although most of the practices have been sorted into categories primarily on the basis of the strength of the scientific evidence for the practice, other factors to consider in prioritizing, such as costs or organizational obstacles, have not been taken into account.
- While CDC's guidelines describe specific clinical practices recommended to reduce HAIs, the infection control standards that CMS and the accrediting organizations require of hospitals describe the fundamental components of a hospital's infection control program. The standards are far fewer in number than CDC's recommended practices and generally do not require that hospitals implement all recommended practices in CDC's guidelines.
- Multiple HHS programs have databases that collect data on HAIs, but limitations in the scope of information collected and a lack of integration across the databases constrain the utility of the data.

GAO concluded that the lack of department-level prioritization of CDC's large number of recommended practices has hindered efforts to promote their implementation. GAO noted that a few of CDC's strongly recommended practices were required by CMS or the accrediting organizations but that it was not reasonable to expect CMS or the accrediting organizations to require additional practices without prioritization. GAO also concluded that HHS has not effectively used the HAI-related data it has collected through multiple databases across the department to provide a complete picture of the extent of the problem.