



Highlights of [GAO-09-516T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Health Care, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

## 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. The statement GAO is issuing today summarizes a March 2008 report, *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 and accrediting organization officials. To update certain information for this statement, GAO reviewed relevant HHS documents released after GAO's March 2008 report.

## 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.

View [GAO-09-516T](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Marjorie Kanof at (202) 512-7114 or [kanofm@gao.gov](mailto:kanofm@gao.gov).

# HEALTH-CARE-ASSOCIATED INFECTIONS IN HOSPITALS

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

### What GAO Found

In its March 2008 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 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 had 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 had not effectively used the HAI-related data it had collected through multiple databases across the department to provide a complete picture of the extent of the problem.

Subsequent to GAO's report, HHS established a steering committee, with senior-level representation of HHS offices and operating divisions, to develop the *HHS Action Plan to Prevent Healthcare-Associated Infections*. This plan includes strategies that are intended to address some of the reasons for the lack of effective actions to control HAIs, including some identification of priorities from among the 1,200 recommended practices, and plans to coordinate HAI-related data collection activities across HHS. HHS released the Action Plan for comment in early January 2009, with the intent of revising it based on the public input it received. Following the transition to the new presidential administration, HHS has continued to solicit public comments. Consequently, it remains uncertain when or if the new administration will choose to implement this plan, and if so, with what modifications, to address GAO's recommendations and reduce the serious problem of HAIs.