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**HEALTH CARE**

## Kit provides tools to ward off hospital infections

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One year ago this month, retired businessman John "Jack" Gardner of Warwick entered a hospital in Rhode Island for a colon operation. It was expected that he would be hospitalized for about one week.

"He never came home," said his son, Gregory Gardner.

Gardner recounted in stark terms how his father remained in the hospital 148 days after he was stricken with a virulent hospital-acquired infection, *Clostridium difficile* (C. diff), which eventually killed him March 26. He spent "the last five months of his life" fighting infection, his son said, adding the details are still too painful to discuss. "My father's experience is one I would not wish on anyone," he said.



PBN PHOTO/VICTORIA AROCHO

**IN MEMORY OF: Gregory Gardner, left, wearing a picture of his father, Jack Gardner, speaks with former R.I. Hospital President Joseph Amaral.**

Gardner spoke at a news conference last week when former WJAR-TV and WPRI-TV reporter and news anchor Pat Mastors, whose father also died of C. diff, unveiled The Empowered Patient Infection Defense Kit she created to help patients, family members and care givers combat hospital-acquired infections.

"Despite the fact that hospitals have stepped up efforts to keep patients safe, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) numbers show 271 people die every day of infections they get in the hospital," Mastors said, or approximately 99,000 people in the U.S. each year. "Even in the finest hospitals with the best caregivers, perfection – faithful hand hygiene, for instance – is unattainable."

Mastors' kit includes: several sets of powerful sanitizers for the hands and for hard surfaces, such as bedside tables; disposable liners for blood-pressure cuffs, which studies have shown to be potential contaminants; a 30-page booklet with information Mastors said she compiled over the last two years consulting with professionals; and custom-designed



PBN PHOTO/VICTORIA AROCHO

**LINE OF DEFENSE: This Infection Defense Kit contains sanitizer, a disinfectant to fight staph and a remote control cover.**

disposable covers for TV remotes, which Mastors herself created.

Tests at the University of Arizona , Mastors said, showed that TV remotes can collect three times the bacteria of other objects in a patient's room. She searched the Internet in vain to find a remote control cover, she said, and wound up designing one herself, using a plastic bag that "costs pennies."

An optional part of the kit is Hibiclens Antiseptic/Antimicrobial Cleanser, to rid skin of the MRSA (methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus) bacteria before surgery. The kits, at \$26.95 with another \$6 charge for the Hibiclens, are available at [www.infectiondefense.com](http://www.infectiondefense.com). Special rates are in place for employers, institutions and health care facilities that wish to distribute kits to patients.

"I can't bring back my father, or lessen our tremendous grief," Gardner said. "But knowing what I know now, I would not hesitate to get an infection defense kit, and I would urge any caregiver to do the same. It could give your parent or loved one a fighting chance." He and his brothers now run the business his father started in 1961, Custom Built Window and Door Systems Inc. in Warwick .

Mastors said her father, Bob Stegeman, never was seriously sick a day in his life until, in 2005, he required neck surgery for a fractured vertebrae suffered in a fall. Two days after the operation, his intestines ruptured from what Mastors said she would later learn was a new and virulent strain of the intestinal bacteria C. diff. He died six months later on Feb. 14, 2006, at the age of 76, while in the hospital for follow-up surgery.

Statistics cited by Mastors are chilling:

- Hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) are the fourth-largest killer in America .
- According to a 2008 report, the CDC estimates that there are 500,000 cases of C. diff annually in the U.S. , up from roughly 150,000 cases in 2001.
- A CDC study published in the current issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that MRSA cases tripled in the U.S. between 2000 and 2005, with an estimated 94,360 people infected and 18,650 dying each year – killing more than •HIV annually.

n Recent CDC studies place hand-hygiene adherence in hospitals at between 29 percent and 48 percent.

"No one is immune, apparently not even Tom Brady," observed Kathleen Connell, a registered nurse and senior state director of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). She referred to the injured Patriots quarterback, who published reports said acquired an infection while undergoing hospital treatment. Connell praised the defense kits because "they're simple and they work."

The news conference was held at Johnson & Wales University because students, through the R.I. Small Business Development Center , are working with Mastors on marketing the defense kits.

The problem of hospital-acquired infections is a national one, said Dr. David Gifford, director of the state health department, who also spoke at the press conference. He noted that hospitals in Rhode Island have been working for several years to reduce infections related to intensive care, and "we have seen some hospitals go six months or longer" without infection incidents. Gifford praised Mastors for the defense kits. "Any effort to empower people is an important step we fully support," he said.

Mastors successfully pushed for a new Rhode Island law this year that mandates the public reporting of HAIs. In another local initiative, the work of the Rhode Island Intensive Care Unit Collaborative in the last three years has led to substantial reductions at hospitals throughout the state in pneumonia and bloodstream infections associated with intensive care. •