

Written By MEG FRASER for Warwick Beacon

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“Dad, I’m here today to ensure that you have not left us in vain. I can’t change the past but we can change the future,” said Gregory Gardner yesterday at a press conference at Johnson and Wales University to reveal a new project, “The Empowered Patient Infection Defense Kits.”

Gardner is the son of Jack Gardner of Warwick, who died last spring of a hospital-acquired infection after being admitted for treatment for colon cancer.

Jack is one of the many who have died from hospital-acquired infections. Figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that 271 people die every day from infections they pick up in health care facilities, making it the nation’s fourth largest killer. In an effort to reduce that number, Gardner joined forces with other families who had suffered similar experiences to share their stories.

Leading the fight is Rhode Island journalist Pat Mastors, who created the defense kits after losing her own father, Bob Stegeman. Stegeman was admitted to the hospital after he injured his neck in a fall, but six months later a hospital-acquired infection resulted in his death in February of 2006.

Since then, Mastors has been researching preventative measures to fight the common causes of hospital-acquired acquired infections.

“We need the hands and eyes of every single person brought to task,” she said.

With the help of the Small Business Development Center at Johnson and Wales, she is hoping to educate and arm patients before a hospital stay – condensed into a small kit that costs \$26.95. Her defense kits include a journal to allow patients to track procedures during their stay, an antimicrobial spray with 24-hour protection against germs, extra large germicidal wipes, hand hygiene products, blood pressure cuff liners and disposable covers for television remotes.

“These are simple solutions and they work,” agreed Kathleen Connell, RN, senior state director of the Rhode Island AARP.

The use of these tools may seem overly cautious, but Mastors was joined by health care professionals who insist that infections are an epidemic.

“No one goes into health care without having the foremost goal of helping the patient with whatever they’re fighting,” said Joseph Amaral, MD, former president of Rhode Island Hospital and a professor of surgery at Brown University. “Despite these great efforts we continue to experience serious and some life threatening illnesses.”

Many of these cases are caused by infections like MRSA and C-diff, which can contaminate everything from doctors’ coats to television remotes. In fact, Mastors reported that television remotes have the highest recorded bacteria in the average hospital room. One study by the CDC reported that 65 percent of the time, when leaning over an infected patient, doctors’ lab coats picked up MRSA bacteria – the bacteria known to cause staph infections. Treatment of these complications results in a major financial burden for health care facilities, seeing as MRSA infections can cost hospitals about \$30,000 per case. The Empowered Patient supporters believe the defense kits are a good step in fighting infection and, in the process, benefiting health care facilities.

“For too long patients have been the passive receivers of care,” Amaral said, explaining that bacteria are all around us and even with exceptional care, patients need to be included in the discussion of how to fight it.

“It really requires a broad joint effort,” agreed Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health David Gifford, MD.

The defense kits have not yet undergone clinical trials, though Mastors said she foresees that process coming in the future. She did, however, offer anecdotal support for the kits and said patient feedback has been positive.

“The person with the most at stake and the least amount of information and power is the patient,” she said. “We need patients on the team and they deserve to be offered that chance.”

Offering up his own stories of friends he has shared the defense kit with, Gardner implored the audience to take small measures to fight a growing problem. His father spent 148 days in the hospital fighting for his life, and when he lost that battle, Gardner promised himself he would speak on behalf of the many people who have suffered a similar fate.

“He never came home because of something none of us ever expected or knew about. My family and I knew nothing about C-diff, MRSA or Staph until it befell my dad, but we could have prepared,” Gardner said, wearing a picture of his father on his lapel. “I cannot impress enough upon everyone how important it is to become educated because these infections are running rampant.”

For more information or to purchase an Empowered Patient Defense Kit, visit www.infectiondefense.com.