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SUPERBUG

The Fatal Menace of MRSA

By Maryn McKenna

Medicine disregarded it. Antibiotics can't control it. MRSA—drug resistant staph—may be the most frightening epidemic since AIDS.

*MRSA is a crisis in many dimensions. Its advance exposes huge gulfs between medical specialists and everyday health care workers, between medicine and public health, between public health and the public it is intended to serve. It illustrates failures of science, failures of the marketplace and failures of support for research and innovation. It touches the way we fund our schools and schedule our work lives, and it demonstrates without question that the way we raise food animals is not sustainable or safe. The history of MRSA is the history of three overlapping epidemics: in hospitals, in the community, and now in food animals. We could have responded to each as they occurred. **We failed.***

—Maryn McKenna, from **SUPERBUG**

We are dealing with a super-pathogen that is, in the words of one researcher, “the biggest thing to happen to healthcare since AIDS.” This isn’t science fiction or a tall tale—it’s reality, and it’s happening right now. In **SUPERBUG: The Fatal Menace of MRSA** (Free Press Hardcover; March 23, 2010; \$26.00), journalist Maryn McKenna offers an intense and critical look into the frightening and ongoing evolution of drug-resistant staph. McKenna deftly tracks the fast-paced, dramatic story of medical tragedy and ineffective public policy—and of an extraordinary scientific puzzle with critically important stakes.

You may have the sense that you’ve heard about MRSA. It’s in the news occasionally, when a pro athlete acquires it or a child is inexplicably felled by it. But **SUPERBUG** shows us that MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) is not an occasional occurrence: It’s a global epidemic, hiding in plain sight. It has swelled almost unnoticed for decades, crossing national borders with ease and threatening hospitals, schools, families and farms. Every year, it kills 19,000 Americans, puts almost half a million in the hospital, sends more than 7 million to the doctor or emergency room, and causes billions of dollars in health care costs. It is the most important healthcare pathogen worldwide.

What is MRSA? It’s a strain of staph, one of the most common bacteria on the planet that has grown resistant to almost all the antibiotics used to treat infections every day. It began as a hospital bug in the 1960s, emerged in everyday life in the 1990s, and in the past decade started appearing in farm animals—

and in the meat we eventually consume. An estimated 4 million Americans are carrying the bug unknowingly. Sometimes they are never made sick by it. Sometimes it attacks without warning, striking down healthy children in hours. Sometimes it causes infections that would derail daily life only temporarily—except that they recur again and again.

But the story of MRSA isn't only the story of a nimble, persistent pathogen—a bacterium so inventive and strategic that researchers who have spent their lives in pursuit of it speak of it with rueful respect. As **SUPERBUG** shows, it is also the story of how we created the conditions that allowed MRSA to emerge: By squeezing doctors' schedules until they have only enough time to write prescriptions, but not enough to explain to patients why drugs are not needed. By shoehorning minor offenders into overcrowded prisons with inadequate healthcare, and cramming livestock into industrial farms where drugs are essential to keeping meat prices cheap. By giving kids a pass on showering after school sports, and looking the other way when health care workers unaccountably refuse to wash their hands. Above all, it is the story of the international epidemic of antimicrobial resistance, a global problem with no easy solutions that threatens to take us back to the pre-antibiotic era.

SUPERBUG draws on more than 200 interviews and more than 1,100 scientific articles to tell MRSA's full and never-told story. It uncovers the forgotten history of the international epidemic that caused methicillin to be created and gave MRSA its name, and reveals the unheeded warnings by a few prescient researchers who saw the current crisis coming. It traces the bug's circuitous path through pets and food animals, crossing species barriers as easily as it does oceans. It reveals physicians' desperation as they discard drug after nonworking drug and scientists' frustration as they struggle to unlock staph's defenses. In heartbreaking detail, it tells the stories of MRSA's victims—the man whose hospital infection forces him into eight operations that leave him unable to pick up anything bigger than a shoebox; the architect whose recurrent infections confine her to her home for months; the toddler infected on New Year's Eve who barely survives; and the teenager a few towns away who falls ill just as quickly, and dies.

SUPERBUG is a work of narrative, of history, of disease detection and public policy. It is a memorial to MRSA's dead and disabled, a challenge to scientists and legislators, and a warning: *We are in an arms race. And the bacteria are winning.*

About the Author

Maryn McKenna is an award-winning science and medical writer and author of *Beating Back the Devil: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service* (named one of the top ten science books of 2004 by Amazon). She is a journalist for national magazines and a contributing writer at the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. She is a graduate of Georgetown University and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, and has been a fellow with the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and at the University of Michigan, the University of Maryland and Harvard Medical School. She lives in Minneapolis.

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For more information, please visit www.Superbugthebook.com.

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