

# When wonder drugs don't work

**By Luis Fabregas and Marisol Bello**

**TRIBUNE-REVIEW** *Sunday, October 12, 2003*

The killer microbes feed off debilitated hospital patients and nest in open wounds. They invade in clusters that form pus-filled pockets on the lungs, heart or skin and eventually eat through blood vessels.

Antibiotics that choke bacteria with lethal toxins are the only defense. But increasingly, the germs are building their own defenses, shrugging off the drugs as if they were sugar pills. In southwestern Pennsylvania, the number of patients reported by hospitals to be struck by these virulent superbugs jumped by more than 450 cases -- a 28 percent increase -- from 2000 to 2001, according to state patient data.

Infected patients are more than twice as likely to die than other patients, the data show. Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that almost 70 percent of all infections contracted in hospitals are resistant to at least one drug commonly used to kill the bacteria. The federal government estimates that hospitals spend about \$1.36 billion a year treating these infections.

The data raise fears among infection-control experts who say hospitals are not doing enough to curb the epidemic.

"Most people in health care are not focusing on this," said Dr. Barry Farr, president of the Society of Healthcare Epidemiologists of America. "Most are like sheep. They think it's better hanging out with the herd and not making any waves."

One of the most common infections is called MRSA, a staph bacteria resistant to the antibiotic methicillin. The other is known as VRE -- vancomycin-resistant enterococci -- an intestinal bacteria immune to the most powerful antibiotic on the market.