

HEALTH CORNER



Infections: Friend or Foe?

By W. Gifford-Jones MD and Diana Gifford

Infections can change the trajectory of a life – and not always in for the worse. Patsy Cline, the celebrated country music singer, attributed her remarkable voice to an infection. “In childhood,” she said, “I developed a serious throat infection, and my heart stopped beating. I recovered from that illness with a voice that boomed forth like Kate Smith’s!”

But bad viruses, bacteria, parasites, and fungi usually cause illnesses that are unwelcome. And when pathogens become widespread and unchecked, which they have proven they can do, time and again, they shape human history.

During the Black Death of the 14th Century, an estimated 25–50 million people in Europe died from bubonic plague. In the 18th Century, smallpox killed around 60 million. Fast forward to the 20th and 21st centuries, and we see the devastating effects of the Spanish Flu, HIV/AIDS, and COVID-19. Make no mistake about it, viruses hold the power to kill without mercy, disrupt our world, and bring health systems to their knees.

For centuries, nobody knew what caused infection. Divine punishment was the general consensus. It wasn’t until the mid-19th century that a clearer understanding began to emerge. Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis was one of the first to observe that something invisible – what we now know were microbes – was transmitting disease. He famously reduced maternal deaths in childbirth by introducing simple handwashing with chlorinated lime. His ideas were dismissed at the time, but he was right.

Not long after, Joseph Lister in Britain built on this work. By applying antiseptic practices in surgery, he dramatically lowered infection rates and revolutionized the operating theatre. Meanwhile, in France, Louis Pasteur was conducting groundbreaking experiments that would confirm the existence of microscopic pathogens. His work, alongside that of Robert Koch, laid the foundation for germ theory, shifting medicine away from superstition and toward science.

This shift in understanding brought about the age of antibiotics, vaccines, and cleaner living conditions. The impact was enormous. We like to celebrate the effect microbiologist and writer Paul de Kruif had with his bestseller, *Microbe Hunters*, published in 1926 and still a keeper on our bookshelf. In 1900, one in every 120 deaths in the U.S. was caused by infection – many of them in young children. By 1980, that number had fallen dramatically to 36 deaths per 100,000, and life expectancy had risen by 30 years.

But here’s the problem: we’re starting to slip backward.

Today, we’re facing a new kind of threat – antibiotic-resistant bacteria and drug-resistant viruses. The very antibiotics that once saved lives are becoming less effective. We’ve over-used and misused them in medicine, farming, and even in household cleaning products. Now, so-called “superbugs” are evolving, outsmarting our drugs, and making once-treatable infections deadly again.

If we’re not careful, we could end up back where we started – in a world where new microbes make a scratch on the arm, a common cold, or a routine operation all life-threatening situations.

What’s the takeaway? Infections have always been part of our story. They’ve forced us to think, adapt, and innovate. And it’s a solid bet that they’ll continue to challenge us. We need to keep up investments in new solutions. But we also need to be smarter with the knowledge we already have.

It’s been said, “Soap and water and common sense are the best disinfectants.” But common sense is in short supply these days. Doctors must stop handing out antibiotics to patients like candy; vets must stop overusing them in livestock too.

Without changes, don’t be surprised when superbugs make light work of our medicine cabinets. Nature bats last – however clever we think we are.

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