

FDA approves new antibiotic Synercid to serve as weapon against drug-resistant bacteria

WASHINGTON (AP) — Doctors gained a crucial new weapon yesterday to save patients from the growing threat of drug-resistant bacteria. The government approved Synercid, the first alternative in 30 years to the current antibiotic of last resort.

Synercid comes at a critical time, as more and more germs develop resistance to that "silver bullet" antibiotic, vancomycin, leaving doctors merely to watch in despair as patients die from once-treatable infections.

"For those of us who treat the most sick patients, in hospitals where they do a lot of major surgery, having another option is very important," Dr. George Eliopoulos of Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Boston said.

But Synercid is not a magic bullet. The Food and Drug Administration approved its use only for certain infections — albeit ones that strike hundreds of thousands of patients — because it works well against some germs but not others.

And doctors should not use Synercid when their antibiotics will do because overuse will simply hasten bacteria's inevitable development of resistance against this new drug, the FDA warned.

"The drug should be used judiciously," FDA antibiotics chief Dr. Sandra Kweder said. "For

many patients it will be a drug of last resort, and we'd like to protect it for as long as possible."

Some infectious disease experts predicted Synercid's cost — at \$85 per intravenous vial, more than four times more expensive than vancomycin — will persuade doctors to save it for the sickest patients.

In studies of more than 2,000 patients, intravenous Synercid effectively quelled 52 percent of infections.

Synercid is most important in fighting a fearsome germ spread to thousands of hospitalized patients called "vancomycin-resistant Enterococcus faecium," infamous for causing lethal infections in the abdomen, urinary tract, post-surgical wounds and heart valves.

In one study of 330 patients infected with that supergerm, 90 percent had their infection clear up within 72 hours of starting treatment with Synercid, the FDA said.

The first super-strength enterococcal infection appeared in 1989, but the problem grew so fast that in the first six months of this year, 18 percent of all enterococcal bloodstream infections were vancomycin-resistant, affecting thousands of people, Dr. Ronald Jones of the University of Iowa, which tracks drug resistance, said.

The FDA also approved Synercid to treat

Resistant HIV on rise

CHICAGO (AP) — Highly drug-resistant strains of the AIDS virus are on the rise, showing up in as many as 4.5 percent of newly infected patients in two new studies.

"Resistance is slowly increasing," Dr. Roger J. Pomerantz, an expert not involved with either study, said. "If you were looking at this five years ago, you would see zero."

The studies — published in today's Journal of the American Medical Association — involve mostly gay white men. Resistance may be more prevalent in other groups, such as drug users and their sex partners, researchers said.

complicated skin infections caused by staph or strep bacteria, opening its use potentially to hundreds of thousands more patients.

Once thought to spread only in hospitals and nursing homes, the government last month announced the chilling discovery that four previously healthy children had died from drug-resistant staph, and scores of other non-hospitalized people have been sickened.

Tropical storm floods Florida

MIAMI (AP) — Tropical Storm Harvey drenched Florida's Gulf Coast with more than 10 inches of rain yesterday, forcing schools to close, flooding homes and businesses and playing havoc with travelers' plans.

The storm left streets in the small fishing village of Everglades City under two feet of water as it quickly moved across South Florida toward the Atlantic Ocean yesterday.

At 5 p.m. EDT, Harvey's center was about 35 miles southwest of Palm Beach, with sustained winds of about 50 mph.

In advance of the storm, schools were ordered shut in such Gulf Coast counties as Hillsborough, Manatee, Sarasota and St. Lucie, mostly out of fear of street flooding. Some government offices also closed for the day.

"We've had up to 30 homes and businesses suffer some flooding," Ken Pineau, director of the Collier County Emergency Operations Center in Naples, said.

At least five Florida airports reported flight cancellations, and delays were common throughout the state.

The storm dumped 10 inches of rain on Collier County and an inch on Miami-Dade County, on Florida's Atlantic Coast, where two possible tornadoes were spotted.

Monastery evacuated as Big Sur fire spreads

LUCIA, Calif. (AP) — Benedictine monks who maintain a vow of silence and bake fruitcakes to support their monastery were among the hundreds forced to flee wildfires that raced up the coastal mountains of Big Sur yesterday.

Eight monks remained behind to help firefighters save their monastery, the New Camadoli Hermitage, which is reachable only by a narrow, twisting road and offers stunning views of the ocean.

Given Big Sur's often-changing winds, firefighters said the blazes could climb a ridge and sweep down onto the property within hours.

"If it comes up nice and slow, things will be cool," Irene Kahn, a volunteer with the Big Sur Fire Department, said. "If it comes up in a firestorm, then things could get interesting."

Some of the monks who stayed behind were cutting brush, the Rev. Romuald Duscher, acting superior for the 32 monks, said. He does not maintain a vow of silence. He said he had to stay, especially since some of the monastery's monks are elderly and did not want to leave their home.

"This is our home," Duscher said. "Also, we feel we can help."

The monks, whose monastery is perched 1,300 feet above the Pacific Ocean about 140 miles south of San Francisco, support a contemplative life by selling fruitcakes and date-nut cakes over the Internet.

The monastery also caters to tourists seeking a refuge from the wired world, and is so popular that reservations have to be made months in advance.

One of the evacuees, Allison Howard, 33, had planned to spend a week at the monastery and was forced to flee after just one night.

"I wanted to be there," Howard, who had hoped for a respite from what she described as a stressful life in Los Angeles, where she studies acupuncture and herbal medicine, said. "It's so peaceful and wonderful."

Lightning-caused fires have burned more than 78,000 acres in Northern California's forests during the past few days.

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