

until 1999. The best estimates of the profession anticipate a lag behind the medical profession by between three and five years.

Humans are a natural reservoir, but data on the number of people colonised by MRSA is not reliable. What is more well recorded are the effects on health. There is increased morbidity and, in some cases, mortality. The spectrum of disease in animals is remarkably similar to human disease – skin infections are common, with the potential for sepsis and systemic infection. Other classic presentations include infections in sutures or wounds, UTIs, the upper respiratory tract and pneumonias.

"In veterinary medicine, we have the opportunity to euthanise our patients," says Ms Boag. "Cost is a consideration, so that even if I decide to treat a patient, the owners might not want to continue. From a financial and animal welfare point of view, they don't want their pet to suffer any more.

"Hospital-acquired infections can tip the balance, with owners making a decision to euthanise on financial or patient invasion grounds. In human medicine they would continue, so success rates may be better. A higher proportion of our patients probably die as a result."

But in many cases, it comes down to public perception of disease. MRSA has a high profile, both as a human ailment and now as a potential zoonosis – there is no getting away from the fact that a MRSA patient is a risk to practice staff and owners.

"I've talked to the owners of MRSA patients and reactions range from 'my dog's got MRSA, so what?' through to blind panic, people screeching down the phone at me and refusing to take the animal home," admits Ms Boag. "We have ended up with patients being hospitalised for two or three months."

Practices should monitor environmental bacteria levels regularly to assess risk and to make sure cleaning keeps microbial populations at a low level. Ms Boag says the use of dip slides on hospital surfaces is a cheap and effective way of obtaining a bacterial culture.

"These slides are used by the Food Standards Agency in assessing microbial cleanliness in restaurants and other places," she says. "They show you a more accurate level of microbial infection on a surface. One problem with traditional methods of sampling – wiping a surface then growing a culture from the microbes you find there – is that it does not tell you whether there was one or a million.

"Another good thing is that

they offer the option to use different types of agar on each slide, so you can screen for MRSA, *Escherichia coli* or whatever type of bacteria you have a problem with in your practice."

The BMF's efforts to create awareness so far extend from leafleting pet owners to lobbying at the highest reaches of academia, but often the simplest messages have the greatest impact. BMF founder Jill Moss took her stand to the Discover Dogs show in London. Using a hand cream that showed up under ultra-violet light, the charity showed visitors how effective its hand washing technique was.

"Most pet owners understand the importance of hygiene, but sometimes we need to see just how difficult it is to get our hands properly clean," says Ms Moss. "Our exercise was brilliant in helping [people] understand this."

### Joining forces

The BMF has also joined forces with Max4Health – another campaigning organisation – the founder of which, Ashley Brooks, almost died from an MRSA infection while being treated for leukaemia in 2002. Mr Brooks fervently believes that hand washing alone is the single most effective way to cut infection rates and save lives.

His animated character, Max, was developed to appeal to the widest possible audience, and a range of Max's promotional materials (posters, DVDs, badges, screen savers and floor markings) are now used in 173 NHS hospitals across the UK as a reminder to staff.

Marc Abraham, a veterinary advisor to The Kennel Club and co-advisor to the BMF, says: "Even though vets and vet nurses receive training in hand hygiene, we need to remember that everyone involved in the care of animals has a responsibility to aim for the best standard of cleanliness. Showing pet owners, vets and vet nurses how much they need to do to get their hands really clean is a great way of concentrating the mind."

Facilitating practices in achieving modest but crucial targets in cleanliness has been the mission of the BMF since its inception, and with the launch of Veterinary Nurse Training Online ([www.veterinarynursetrainingonline.org](http://www.veterinarynursetrainingonline.org)) at BVNA Congress, Ms Moss feels the charity achieved a huge goal. Working with the College of Animal Welfare, the RVC and the Petplan Charitable Trust, nurses and lay staff now have an online reference for infection control. It has a photographic tour illustrating good and bad practice, descriptions of MRSA, the clinical issues and the option



Left: Marc Abraham, Jill Moss (second left) and volunteers on the Bella Moss Foundation stand at the Discover Dogs show. Below: hand washing is a very simple procedure, but one that can reduce the risk of MRSA infection dramatically.



of completing an online test for a £5 donation, which – if passed – offers an award of achievement issued by the College of Animal Welfare.

"We recognise how difficult it can be for a veterinary practice

to release staff for CPD seminars and conferences," says Ms Moss. "This way, knowledge can be acquired without taking too much time out."

There are plans to add more modules to the website in future,

including topics such as wound management. Groundwork is also being laid for a second international conference on MRSA and antimicrobial resistance between September 22 and 26.

"Right now, the risk factors for

MRSA and other infections are not well known, and we need more veterinary studies in this area," concludes Ms Boag. "One thing is certain – you cannot turn your practice into a fortress that will keep all MRSA out." ■

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