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WEDNESDAY
October 28, 2009

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CAREER EXPLORATION

HOSPITAL EPIDEMIOLOGIST



PHOTOS BY MELISSA GORDON, VCU PUBLIC RELATIONS

Dr. Gonzalo Bearman, associate hospital epidemiologist at VCU Medical Center, is on the front line when it comes to infectious diseases.

As a hospital epidemiologist, Bearman studies infectious diseases and risk factors and works

with the frequency, control and management of hospital-acquired infections.

“Our goal is to provide a safe environment for staff and health care workers as well as visitors and patients,” he said.

Hospital epidemiology is a specialty in the broader field of epidemiology. Hospital epidemiologists are concerned with reducing the risk of hospital-acquired infections, many of which can occur in high-risk patients in the intensive care unit and post-operative patients.

“We promote hospital policies that encourage vaccination and adherence to infection control best practices,” Bearman said.

Hospital epidemiologists work in conjunction with various departments, including administration, nursing leadership, physician leadership, clinical microbiology, employee health and pharmacy.

“It’s a collaborate effort,” Bearman said. “We have a team that does surveillance of infections and compliance with infection control methods.”

Because they are also physicians, hospital epidemiologists see patients during the day. They also attend meetings, review policy and study feedback they receive from infection control nurses.

“It’s a dual role, physician and epidemiologist,” Bearman said.

In hospitals that are also universities, hospital epidemiologists are expected to conduct research and write scholarly papers that relate to the field. The job requires someone who has high energy and is well organized.

“The hours can be long. You’ll average eight to 12 hours depending on the number of patients and issues you are deal-

ing with,” he said. “You’ll also have lots of tasks to prioritize.”

People in the field have completed college, medical school and three years of internal medicine. They also have two to three years in infectious diseases and a master’s degree in public health or science.

“That advanced degree is necessary to understand the principles and practices of epidemiology,” Bearman said.

In addition to hospitals, epidemiologists can work in private practice.

“There is more interest in the field because of SARS,



From left, Kara Elam, research coordinator, Gonzalo Bearman, M.D., associate professor of internal medicine and associate hospital epidemiologist, and Connie Atkinson, infection control nurse in VCU’s Division of Infectious Diseases, discuss a staph infection on a petri dish.

anthrax and H1N1 (Swine Flu),” Bearman said. “One of the challenges that makes the job enjoyable is the fact that there are always new and emerging infectious diseases.”

— By Joan Tuppence
Joan Tuppence & Associates