

Press release – 9 April 2014

Staphylococcus aureus – biography of an occasional superbug

Carried harmlessly up our noses by 30 per cent of us, *Staphylococcus aureus* still has the ability to cause us harm and is one of the commonest causes of wound infections after surgery.

150 years since it was effectively challenged for the first time by Joseph Lister with carbolic, Professor Hugh Pennington, Emeritus Professor of Bacteriology at the University of Aberdeen and Fellow of The Royal College of Pathologists, will chart the history of this persistent bug and how it still poses a significant risk to our health.

Professor Pennington explains: “Attempts in the past to fight *Staphylococcus aureus* and understand it have led to major discoveries. First identified as a human pathogen by a surgeon in Aberdeen in 1888, it was one of the few bacterial species harmful to humans to be described in Britain during the golden age of bacteriological discovery at the end of the nineteenth century.

“My lecture will chart the history of *Staphylococcus aureus* including how Alexander Fleming’s desire to better understand its behaviour led to the discovery of penicillin. Moving on to the present, I will be talking about the role of *Staph. aureus* pneumonia as a complication of flu and how it has featured in flu pandemics from 1918 right up to the recent swine flu, demonstrating how we have not finished with this significant adversary.”

Although *Staphylococcus aureus* commonly colonises human skin and can live in the mucus inside our noses without causing any harm, if it enters our bodies through broken skin or after surgery it can wreak havoc. Illnesses ranging from mild to life-threatening can develop including skin infections, infected eczema, abscesses or joint infections, heart valve infections, pneumonia and infections in our blood.

Dr Archie Prentice, President of The Royal College of Pathologists, said: “The achievements of pathologists working in the field of medical microbiology have saved countless lives by understanding how pathogens harm and kill, leading to effective prevention and treatment of disease. We are delighted that Professor Pennington, one of the UK’s leading bacteriologists, is taking part in our ‘A History of Pathology in 50 Objects’ lecture series highlighting the attempts to fight this potentially lethal bacterium over the last 150 years.”

Staphylococcus aureus – biography of a bug sometimes super, most often not will take place at [the Royal Society on Friday 11 April 2014 at 1pm](#). The lecture is free and will be delivered by Professor Hugh Pennington. It forms part of a series of lectures from the Royal College of Pathologists which explores a [History of Pathology in 50 Objects](#). The series was commissioned as part of the College’s 50th Anniversary in 2012. Members and staff were asked to nominate the objects they believe had the greatest impact in pathology.

Ends

For further information, please contact The Royal College of Pathologists’ Press and Communications Department on 020 7451 6752. Mobile; 0757 834 9018 or email: samantha.jayaram@rcpath.org.



Notes for editors

- The Royal College of Pathologists is a professional membership organisation committed to setting and maintaining professional standards and to promoting excellence in the practice of pathology. The College represents 19 pathology specialties. Forensic pathologists represent less than 1% of the fellowship of the College. www.rcpath.org
[@rcpath](https://twitter.com/rcpath)
- Thomas Hugh Pennington, CBE, FRCPath, FRCP, FMedSci, FRSE is Emeritus Professor of Bacteriology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland
- The lecture will be given as part of a series of public history of science lectures held at the Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG. This event is free to attend and open to all. No tickets are required. Doors open at 12.30pm and seats will be allocated on a first-come-first-served basis.
- **The Royal Society** is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists drawn from all areas of science, engineering, and medicine. The Society's fundamental purpose, reflected in its founding Charters of the 1660s, is to recognise, promote, and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity.

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