

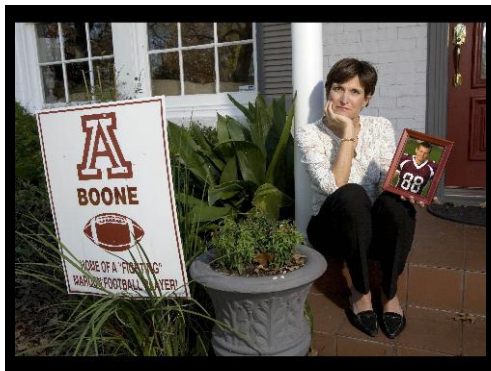
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Texas Football Succumbs to Virulent Staph Infection From Turf

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By Victor Epstein



Dec. 21 (Bloomberg) -- Missy Baker recalls the moment when she realized that her football-playing son, Boone, didn't just have the flu.

“He told me he was paralyzed,” Baker said. “I said, ‘What do you mean? I just saw you walk to the bathroom two hours ago.’ And he said, ‘Mom, I can't move my arms or legs.’”

Sixteen-year-old Boone, a wide receiver for Texas's Austin High School, was suffering from a recurrence of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, which his doctor said he got through an abrasion from playing on artificial turf, Baker said.

Texas has artificial turf at **18 percent** of its high school football stadiums, according to Web site [Texasbob.com](#). It also has an MRSA infection rate among players that is 16 times higher than the estimated national average, according to three **studies** by the Texas Department of State Health Services.

“This is a disease that can kill you,” said Carolina Espinoza, a graduate epidemiology student at the **University of Texas** in Houston, who helped conduct one of the studies. “If I were a football player, I would be alarmed.”

MRSA is a virulent strain of drug-resistant staph bacteria that plagued hospitals for decades and migrated into the general population in recent years, said Edward Septimus, an infectious disease specialist at **Methodist Hospital System** in Houston. Without proper treatment, it can spread to internal organs and bones after reaching the bloodstream, causing organ failure, he said.

In October, the deaths of a Brooklyn boy and a Virginia youth were blamed on MRSA infections.

Infection Rate

At least 276 football players were infected with MRSA from 2003 through 2005, a rate of 517 for each 100,000, according to the Texas studies. The **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** in Atlanta reports a rate for the general population of 32 in 100,000.

Football players often become infected at the site of a turf burn and are misdiagnosed, said [bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=2...](#)

David Smith, co-author of a study showing that MRSA-related hospitalizations in the U.S. more than doubled from 1999 to 2005.

“The turf burns themselves are just the kind of minor skin injury that MRSA can exploit,” said **Elliot Pellman**, medical liaison for the **National Football League**, which also has had infections among its players.

Football dominates high school sports in Texas, which has more participants than any other state. Seventy-four schools have stadiums seating more than 10,000. The sport provides 22,041 full-time jobs and generates \$2.88 billion in annual spending, said **Ray Perryman**, president of Perryman Group, a Waco economic and financial analysis firm.

Football Risk

Football also produces more MRSA infections than any other sport, said Marilyn Felkner, the epidemiologist who led the Texas studies. The department wasn't able to obtain enough data to establish a statistical link between artificial turf and MRSA infections, she said.

“So many schools had at least one case,” Felkner said of a 2005 report showing 76 high school athletic departments with MRSA infections. “It was more schools than we would have thought.”

In Collin County, which includes parts of Dallas and Plano, six high schools had more than two infected athletes this fall, said Janet Glowicz, county epidemiologist.

MRSA causes more deaths than any of the **51 infectious diseases** tracked by the CDC, including AIDS, according to CDC data. The agency doesn't require medical professionals to report MRSA cases.

Texas plans a pilot program next year making MRSA a reportable illness in three regions, said Bryan Alsip, assistant health director for San Antonio.

Epidemic Proportions

Researchers including Septimus blame MRSA's spread on overuse of antibiotics. A CDC report in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that MRSA caused three times more infections than previously thought.

“This is an epidemic,” Smith said. His report was published by the CDC in the December edition of Emerging Infectious Diseases. “It's a big problem, and it's likely to get bigger.”

Smith said the public needs to hear more about MRSA. There is no benefit in alarming people, but they have a right to know that it is a serious situation, he said.

Spreading MRSA can be prevented by frequent hand washing, covering scratches and turf burns, disinfecting whirlpools between uses, and not sharing towels or razors, the Texas health department advises.

Mike Carroll, head athletic trainer at Stephenville High School near Fort Worth, said he tells coaches to avoid saying “staph” when they see a possible infection.

“You want people to be educated, but you don't want to create a sky-is-falling mentality,” Carroll said.

Lasting Fear

Baker said she was shocked to learn how pervasive MRSA is. It's also persistent: Boone was originally diagnosed in October 2006, and the infection returned last January. He had

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three surgeries to remove infected tissue and spent three weeks in the hospital.

While Boone resumed playing football this season, fear of another relapse haunts the family. Some survivors continue to carry the bacteria, according to doctors and the CDC.

Baker said she and her husband spent a sleepless night when Boone developed a skin infection that looked like a spider bite.

``We were both wide awake and shaking with fear," she said. The wound cleared up the next day.

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