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## Answers About Cleaning in Hospitals

By *John Richter* — posted 09/28/2010



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Most people know that when a medical situation arises—especially one that involves a hospital stay—taking responsibility for one's own medical treatment is essential. This typically means doing your own “homework” regarding your medical condition, investigating the treatments and options available, and asking doctors and other medical professionals about tests, procedures, their experiences with the condition, and risks.

And if a hospital stay is required, one question that definitely should come up (but rarely does) is: Who was in this room before me? Of course, it isn't really the *who* that's important; what matters is actually what illness that person was admitted to the hospital with ... or contracted in the hospital.

### **Why is this information so crucial?**

According to a research team headed by Dr. John Boyce of the Yale University School of Medicine<sup>1</sup>, if the patient previously occupying a hospital room had a highly infectious disease such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) or Norovirus, there is “an increased risk [of the next patient admitted to that same room] contracting the multi-drug resistant organisms” associated with these diseases.

Complicating matters, the study also found that some pathogens and contaminants can stay alive far longer than was previously believed possible. In some cases, pathogens were still found several weeks after an infected person vacated a room.

### **Solutions**

Boyce and his team offer two key suggestions to help stop the spread of infectious diseases in hospital settings. At the top of their list is proper hand washing by all medical staff. However, this was followed very closely with more effective, hygienic cleaning.

In fact, the study reported, “There is increasing evidence that contaminated surfaces in hospitals...are a source of transmission of pathogens...and reducing environmental contamination by improved cleaning and disinfecting practices should reduce the acquisition of pathogens by patients and result in fewer infections.”

The researchers offered the following simple yet practical suggestions to improve cleaning and disinfecting of hospital rooms:

- Visual inspections should be conducted in patient rooms after they are vacated and cleaned and before a new patient is admitted.
- High-touch areas such as door knobs, light switches, etc., should be marked with a florescent marker to check that they are being

- cleaned.
- o Surfaces should be verified as hygienically clean through the use of petri dish studies or ATP<sup>2</sup> systems that can assess contamination levels on surfaces.

The researchers admitted that visually inspecting a hospital room for cleanliness has obvious limitations and marking high-touch areas with florescent markers may sound a bit juvenile. Nevertheless, these suggestions were made for a very serious reason: to get everyone, especially custodial workers, focused on the importance of cleaning as it regards stopping the spread of infectious diseases.

### **A Closer Look at Cleaning Strategies**

Boyce's study went further, suggesting that an entirely different type of cleaning practice, method, or system might be called for in order to help stop the spread of disease. In fact, according to his research, "Inadequate cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces is usually [the] result of suboptimal cleaning practices. In many facilities, only about 50 percent of the surfaces in patient rooms that should be cleaned are cleaned by housekeepers."

Once again, the researchers offered some practical suggestions for addressing the issue, including the use of hydrogen peroxide "misting" systems or vapor cleaning technology.<sup>3</sup>

However, they also acknowledged that these systems do not always eliminate certain types of pathogens and that further investigation into cleaning systems and technologies "is warranted."

One alternative cleaning technology that shows potential in addressing this problem—and which is already being used successfully in some medical facilities—is the use of what ISSA refers to as "spray-and-vac" cleaning systems. This technology may prove especially effective in hospital settings because it helps to ensure that pathogens are actually removed from surfaces, a key concern.

Some studies indicate that more conventional cleaning methods—including the use of cleaning cloths, mops, and buckets—may actually spread contaminants from one location to another rather than removing them. According to Dr. Jay Glasel, founder of Global Scientific Consulting in Farmington, CT, spray-and-vac systems can be as much as "60 times more effective at reducing bacterial contamination when compared to conventional cleaning methods."

### **Cleaning at the Forefront for Health**

Although it also touches on the importance of proper hand washing, the bulk of Boyce's report focuses on one thing: the need for effective, proper, hygienic cleaning. As Boyce makes clear, the role that cleaning

plays in keeping people healthy must be stressed to cleaning professionals in medical locations as well as other facilities. Stated as simply as possible: effective, hygienic cleaning helps protect human health.

#### **Related Video**

Check out this video where Darrel Hicks discusses infection control.

[Watch it now.](#)

1 "When the Patient Is Discharged: Environmental Contamination in Healthcare Settings"; in *Medscape Today*, by Dr. John Boyce, MD, June 11, 2010.

2 The presence of adenosine triphosphate (or ATP) bioluminescence on surfaces may indicate that potentially harmful contaminants are present. ATP rapid monitoring systems are commonly used in laboratories, grocery stores, and now by the professional cleaning industry to help ensure that surfaces are clean and contaminant free.

3 Hydrogen peroxide misting systems release small amounts of hydrogen peroxide throughout a hospital or medical facility room to help kill contaminants. Vapor cleaning systems use high temperature water vapor and pressure to clean and sanitize surfaces.



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