



Stop the Spread of Disease

Proper Hand Hygiene, A Custom Whose Time Has Come

It's been 125 years since Viennese doctor Ignaz Semmelweis first

demonstrated that routine hand washing could stop the spread of disease. At that time, an alarming number of people were dying in hospitals, and many believed going to a hospital was more of a death sentence than an opportunity to be healed.

Dr. Semmelweis noticed that medical students and physicians worked on cadavers during anatomy classes and when through would make their rounds, meeting and touching patients—without washing their hands first. Pathogenic bacteria from the cadavers were regularly transmitted to the hands of the students and physicians and then to the patients.

Moreover, healthcare workers moved from patient to patient without stopping or even considering washing their hands, so germs gathered from one patient could spread to another. The problem was especially troublesome in the maternity ward, where the death rate was five times higher for mothers who delivered in the hospital than it was for those who delivered at home.

Another 50 years would pass before hospitals, restaurants, food-processing facilities, schools, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and others would recognize the value of hand washing. The realization was a landmark achievement in protecting public health.

However, the lack of proper hand hygiene continues to be a problem in all types of facilities even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that "hand hygiene is the single most critical measure for reducing the transmission of [potentially harmful] pathogens and organisms."

Even in hospitals where the importance of hand washing and hygiene is essentially "written in stone," studies indicate that compliance among healthcare providers is, on average, well below 50 percent (Pittet, 2001). The goal is 90 percent compliance, indicating a significant gap between what is actually occurring and what is preferred. And as mentioned earlier, lack of proper hand washing is not found just in medical facilities. In 1998, an Atlanta building service contractor responsible for cleaning several day-care centers in the city contracted hepatitis A. After being diagnosed, he called the day-care centers to tell them about his illness. To his surprise, he was told six other adults associated with the centers had come down with the disease.

Within a month, several family members of those six were also stricken. How could this happen? Hepatitis A, like so many other viruses and diseases, is typically spread through poor hand hygiene. One person does not wash his or her hands or do so thoroughly enough, spreading the disease to others. With proper hand washing, most likely this all could have been prevented.

Why the Problem Continues

We know how important hand hygiene is, so why are there still hand-washing compliance problems in hospitals? And why do surveys often report that one-third or more people using public restrooms do not wash their hands before they leave?

Experts say one cause for this is that the importance of hand hygiene is not stressed as much in many areas of the world. For instance, North American visitors to some parts of the world will often find there is no soap, water, or even sinks in many public restrooms, making hand washing impossible.

When these people visit North America, some may bring their lack of hand washing customs with them.

"But in the United States, it is believed one major reason the problem continues is because of time and convenience," says Jim Glenn, CEO of Meritech, which manufactures automated hand washing and infection control systems. "People simply do not take the time to wash their hands at work, at home, or in school. In some facilities, such as factories, foodservice centers, and even hospitals, washroom sinks are not readily available."

According to Glenn, a secondary reason relates to the fact that often when people do wash their hands, they don't do it thoroughly enough. "Hands should be washed using soaps and solutions at approximately 100° F for at least 20 seconds," Glenn adds.

To help rectify the problem, many facilities are now automating hand washing. They are using touch-free systems that wash, sanitize, and rinse hands using non-alcohol disinfecting solutions in as little as 10 seconds. A hand sanitizer that also protects the skin is used in

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the wash to kill nearly 100 percent of pathogens.

“These units can be installed in a variety of locations in a facility, making it easier and quicker for workers to thoroughly clean their hands,” says Glenn. “This also makes washing hands thorough and convenient. All the hand washing barriers have been eliminated.”

Proper hand washing is probably the simplest, least costly, and yet most effective way possible to stop the transmission of disease. “To help make more workers comply, we need to continue to stress the importance of proper hand hygiene and how it protects everyone’s health,” says Glenn. “We also have to make it easier for them to wash their hands, eliminating any and all barriers that have been obstacles in the past.” **FSM**

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