CORRESPONDENCE

Hand Hygiene for the Prevention of Nosocomial Infections

by Prof. Dr. med. Günter Kampf, Prof. Dr. med. Harald Löffler,
Prof. Dr. med. Petra Gastmeier in volume 40/2009

Hand Hygiene Prevents MRSA Transmission

The discovery that disinfecting hands reduces transmission of pathogens is a cornerstone of modern medicine and a crucial quality parameter in the healthcare system. Improving hand hygiene is obligatory for all institutions. We therefore are at a loss to understand why many parties in Germany have chosen not to participate in the national clean hands campaign, "Aktion saubere Hände." At University Medical Center Freiburg we have observed that linking hand hygiene with skin protection/skin care, as was implemented in collaboration with the occupational health services and the Department of Dermatology, has yielded enormous improvements. Health care workers' hands are the crucial tools of the trade where treating patients is concerned—hands have to protect patients, but in turn they have to be protected themselves. Additionally, we switched to colouring- and perfume-free products for hand hygiene, because the colouring and perfume in such preparations do not contribute to a product's effectiveness or tolerability and may even trigger sensitization. Even if skin problems due to hand hygiene are usually caused by irritant-toxic damage, the risk for contact allergies should also be reduced (2). After the switch we again observed a substantial increase in the use of alcohol-based hand rub in our institution—additionally promoted by a series of measures to improve hand hygiene, such as short training sessions, improved access to dispensers, complemented use of wearable dispensers—for example, for transport services. In a recent study, we have shown that increased use of alcohol-based hand rub helps prevent transmission of nosocomial MRSA (3). In addition to improving the quality of medical treatment and patient safety, we were thus able to reduce the time, money, and effort spent on delivering health care.

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Conflict of interest statement

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In Reply:

We thank our colleagues from Freiburg for their correspondence. Their letter emphasizes the beneficial linking of hand hygiene and skin protection, as well as the fact that potential for improvement exists in many medical institutions. For this reason, many hospitals have welcomed the services provided by the clean hands campaign, including information and training materials, brochures, argumentation aids, consistent documentation systems for monitoring compliance with hand disinfection measures, and usage data for alcohol containing hand disinfectants. However, the main issue is that because of the campaign, the large scale participation of medical institutions, and their manifold activities, have substantially raised awareness for the topic on Germany.

Nationwide, more than 600 hospitals and other healthcare institutions are participating in the clean hands campaign. For hospitals that have been participating since the early days of the campaign—early 2008—we have provided an initial analysis of the potential for improvement. The average increase in the use of alcoholic hand disinfectants for these hospitals (a surrogate parameter for compliance with hand disinfection measures) was as high as 13%.

The aim is not only to improve the situation further but to achieve a sustainable effect by fundamentally changing attitudes, and to thus reduce the risk of infection during medical treatment even further.

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