

Handwashing Key to Infection Control

Here's a quiz: In a survey, pediatric ICU physicians claimed to wash their hands between patients 73% of the time. What was the actual percentage, after a period of observation?

a.) 80% b.) 40% c.) 73% d.) 10%.

One more: What percentage of infectious diseases are transmitted by touch?

a.) 30% b.) 80% c.) 55% d.) 68%

Check out the correct answers after the jump...

Amazingly, the actual percentage of the physicians who washed their hands between patients was 10%. And the percentage of infectious diseases spread by touch is 80%.

So doctors, thanks to a fantasy in which they wash their hands way more than they actually do, are a serious risk to spread diseases to the very patients they're trying to get well. That is a problem.

But how to fix it?

Part of the problem, according to a forthcoming study in the journal Psychological Science, are the actual signs posted in hospital washrooms urging health care workers to wash their hands. Changing the wording of the sign from "Wash Your Hands to Protect Yourself" to "Wash Your Hands to Protect Your Patients," appealing to their foundation in the Hippocratic Oath, the study found could motivate some doctors and nurses to wash their hands more frequently.

Doctors and nurses often enter patient room with their hands full, holding a chart, rolling a cart, or carrying something else. But this is no excuse not to pause a moment to clean their hands; when hand hygiene compliance in a hospital goes up, patient infection rates go down. About 1 in 20 hospital patients becomes ill with an infection — many or most of them from the hands of health-care workers. Hospital-acquired infections are the fourth leading cause of death in America: over 100,00 deaths a year. And treating these unnecessary infections end up costing \$28 to \$45 billion each year.

Hospitals are going to lengths such as video monitoring systems, with posted results to appeal to a caregiver's competitive nature. These systems have proven to be effective in raising rates of handwashing but are an expensive solution to a problem that seems so simple to solve. With so much money, not to mention lives at stake, infection control is a crucial issue in healthcare today and in the future, and it seems the simplest solution may be the best – inform caregivers of these dire statistics, and handwashing rates are sure to rise.

