

May 5 is the World Hand Hygiene Day Save lives—clean your hands!

Years after the Hungarian gynecologist Dr Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis discovered that the incidence of puerperal fever could be drastically cut by the use of hand disinfection in obstetrical clinics, improving hand hygiene (HH) remains a challenge for infection control amongst practitioners in healthcare institutions and in the community.

Hand hygiene is the most effective measure for interrupting the transmission of microorganisms which cause infection both in the community and in the healthcare setting. There are 2–3 million deaths worldwide each year from diarrheal diseases, many of which could be prevented. It has been estimated that handwashing with soap could save a million lives a year. Developing countries present extra hurdles when trying to increase handwashing.

In spite of the increased attention directed at HH in the medical literature, many issues remain unexplored and unresolved. Compliance with HH recommendations is poor worldwide. Hand hygiene compliance among healthcare workers is not acceptable below 40% globally. The main reasons for noncompliance are lack of education; being a medical doctor, lack of performance feedback; working in a critical care unit, lack of available or suitable HH agents, and lack of skin care products. Compliance with HH practices due to behavioral and cultural factors is one of the important barriers. While the techniques involved in HH are simple, the complex interdependence of factors which determine HH behavior make the study of HH complex. It is now recognized that improving compliance with HH recommendations depends on altering human behavior and requires an understanding of what motivates HH behavior and this will vary from culture to culture. It is impossible to make global recommendations regarding HH practices because what works in one culture may not work in another and all recommendations must take geographical and cultural factors into account.

Hand hygiene must be part of an integrated approach to infection control.

Using HH as a sole measure to reduce infection is unlikely to be successful when other factors in infection control, such as environmental hygiene, crowding, staffing levels and education are inadequate.

Today, HH has become a major issue of patient safety. In addition to being a key element in standard precautions, HH has emerged as an important component in specific-site infection prevention recommendations recently. In accordance with the first Global Patient Safety Challenge, the WHO published important instructions including guidelines on HH in health care, implementation of the WHO Multimodal HH Improvement Strategy, and HH technical reference manual.

There are many issues concerning all aspects of HH which remain unresolved. This is reflected in the lack of success so far. This promotion of HH cannot be confined to a healthcare setting. There must be the creation of a culture promoting HH at all levels of society to provide a foundation on which to establish a structure promoting compliance

This year's theme for the World Hand Hygiene Day, 5 May 2022, is focused on recognizing that we can add to a facility's climate or culture of safety and quality through cleaning our hands but also that a strong quality and safety culture will encourage people to clean hands at the right times and with the right products. Unite, talk and work together on HH for high-quality safer care everywhere. Practice, preach and promote HH.

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