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HAND HYGIENE TIMES



Speaking up for Hand Hygiene: It Takes a Village

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Hand hygiene is the task that is performed the most by any healthcare worker (HCW) in a clinical setting. Yet we are far short of expectations with average compliance rates of less than 40%,¹ elevating this safety measure as a top priority for most healthcare facilities. However, in spite of the important work that has been done to improve hand hygiene, it seems that we are getting nowhere fast.

So why aren't HCWs cleaning their hands more? To answer this question, we would traditionally look for "barriers" to hand hygiene (and we are all familiar with common barriers) with the underlying assumption that if we remove the barriers, HCWs will clean their hands. So we get busy educating staff, placing signage as reminders, performing workflow evaluations, moving dispensers for best placement, ensuring dispensers are full of product, ramping up our monitoring programs, evaluating our safety cultures, and looking to our senior leadership for their commitment. And when we haven't moved the dial, we start the loop again.

While these strategies are an essential part of a hand hygiene program and can help support a change in behavior, they don't necessarily cause it. You see, removing barriers in an effort to get HCWs to clean their hands assumes that they already have the set of habits and practices in place for performing hand hygiene at the right time, every time, and the barriers are simply keeping them from it. But history has shown us that this is not the case.

The hand hygiene habits and practices that are currently in place in our clinical units are deeply rooted, and the challenge of changing longstanding habits is like uprooting a powerful oak tree. HCWs in their very busy world of patient care often do not have hand hygiene top of mind, and unless we raise the level of awareness, making the unconscious conscious, we will be unable to form new habits leading to improved compliance.

So how do we increase the frequency with which HCWs will engage in the practice of cleaning their hands? We develop strong unit-based programs for speaking up: an all-hands-on-deck approach with everyone on the front lines of patient care providing Just-in-Time reminders for noncompliance and kudos for good hand hygiene.² We need to create a new set of habits and practices and ways in which HCWs communicate and interact with each other around hand hygiene. The unit has to take this on as a team, supporting each other and holding each other accountable on a 24/7 basis. This cannot be accomplished solely by an Infection Prevention and Control Professional rounding the units periodically -- it takes a village.

Admittedly, this is hard work. It will take commitment, persistence, and endurance to hold fast to a journey that will span years and not months. But this is how we change hand hygiene culture.

¹ Erasmus, et al. Systematic review of studies on compliance with hand hygiene guidelines in hospital care. *Infect Control Hosp Epidemiol.* 2010;31:283-294

² Sickbert-Bennett, et al. The holy grail of hand hygiene compliance: Just-in-time peer coaching that leads to behavior change. *Infect Control Hosp Epidemiol.* 2020;41:229-232.