

Infection: Don't Pass It On

VA campaign seeks to involve all health care staff, patients, visitors.

Motherhood, apple pie, washing your hands, and covering your coughs—who could argue with any of these? Yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that only about four out of 10 health care workers follow recommended hand cleaning procedures. This means that in the average hospital around the country six of 10 health care workers may be walking around from patient to patient or bathroom to patient or patient to cafeteria passing along germs that lead to infection, illness, or worse.

A new VA public health campaign called “Infection: Don't Pass It On” aims to help. “The campaign encourages everyone in a VA health care facility—paid staff or volunteer, clinical or non-clinical, patient or visitor—to get involved in preventing infections,” says Dr. Susan Mather, chief officer for public health and environmental hazards.

That office, the National Center for Patient Safety, and the Employee Education System, along with VA experts in infection control, are developing educational materials and messages for the VA health care system. The campaign both promotes basic public health measures (clean your hands, cover your coughs and sneezes) and makes available key information to use in infectious disease emergencies (see sidebar, right).

Why a Campaign?

The campaign has several important rationales. One is the promotion of safety for patients and staff, as well as their loved ones and the community, and reduction of ill-

ness. “Health care-associated infections account for 50 percent of all major hospital complications and have occurred in about one in 20 patients admitted to U.S. hospitals in general, according to a 2003 re-

Infectious Disease Emergencies

Sometimes, an infection is so serious that it requires careful extra measures to contain it. VA infection control professionals are the experts in each hospital on what to do, and they work with staff throughout the facility. Several of them have been involved in developing and reviewing information for the campaign, “Infection: Don't Pass It On,” working particularly on materials dealing with the use of personal protective equipment, or PPE.

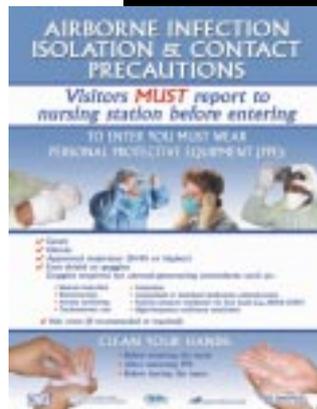
Wearing PPE is necessary for staff and other visitors of patients on isolation due to some contagious infections. Some of these infections are rare or have not occurred in VA hospitals at all, but could be dangerous to patients and staff if present. These include severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), smallpox, monkeypox, avian influenza, and certain forms of hemorrhagic fevers.

VA campaign staff sought existing material on how to don and safely remove PPE. Finding little available, they developed three posters to address this need.

Printed copies are being sent to VA infection control professionals for use in emergencies and in training sessions. Additional copies and Spanish versions will be available to order through facility education contacts and

to download through the campaign Web site at www.publichealth.va.gov/infectiondontpassiton.

How does hand hygiene fit into the picture in an emergency? It remains critical. The CDC reports that investigations of disease outbreaks show an association between infections and understaffing or overcrowding, with a consistent link to lack of hand hygiene practices. Hand cleaning must be done even if gloves are worn. All of the new PPE posters include steps of hand cleaning before donning PPE (including gloves) and entering an affected patient's room, after removing PPE, and before leaving the room.





port by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine," says Dr. James Bagian, director of VA's National Center for Patient Safety. "Identifying and preventing the causes of these infections is a priority for VA." The number one carrier for these infections, according to the CDC, is the hands of health care workers and others who have patient contact.

A second rationale for the campaign is preparedness, both for natural biological events such as flu season, and for manmade ones, such as bioterrorist acts.

A third rationale is compliance with regulations and guidelines. As of 2004, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations requires that hospitals comply with the current CDC hand hygiene guidelines. VA's campaign reflects and supports these guidelines, which focus on the use of alcohol-based hand rubs or antimicrobial soap and water to decontaminate hands, and the proper use of gloves.

It doesn't hurt that hand hy-

giene practices can actually save time and money, not to mention spare patients, staff, and those around them from needless infections and their consequences. The costs of hospital infections outweigh the costs of stocking hand hygiene products. The CDC estimates that the cost of four or five infections of average severity or of just one severe infection of a surgical site, a lower respiratory infection, or a blood-stream infection is as much or greater than the annual budget for hand hygiene products for a hospital.

Newly developed products, particularly alcohol-based hand rubs, can save even more time than traditional hand cleaning methods. The CDC estimates that in an eight-hour shift, almost an hour of a nurse's time in an intensive care unit can be saved by using an alcohol-based hand rub at the bedside instead of going to a sink for hand washing. The added benefit is that the alcohol-based hand rubs are generally more effective at killing bacte-

ria and other microorganisms.

Promoting Hand Cleaning

So how do you call attention to an age-old issue with important

For More Information

- The Web site for the VA campaign is www.publichealth.va.gov/infectiondontpassiton.
- CDC hand hygiene information cited here is available at www.cdc.gov/handhygiene, particularly the article "Guideline for Hand Hygiene in Healthcare Settings: Recommendations of the Healthcare Infection Control Practice Advisory Committee and the HICPAC/SHEA/APIC/IDSA Hand Hygiene Task Force."
- The Institute of Medicine reference is "Priority Areas for National Action," available at www.nap.edu/catalog/10593.html.

new-age implications and keep people's awareness up? The CDC also weighs in on this, saying strategies to promote hand hygiene should be multifaceted and multidisciplinary.

Multifaceted is a good word for the materials used in VA's campaign. The campaign team is counting on color, variety, and even humor to convey that cleaning hands and covering coughs are important. Together they have come up with 60 posters (10 in Spanish) to carry the messages of the campaign.

The posters are designed to be rotated often to keep people interested and to convey a range of information through the use of photos, drawings, technical shots of bacteria, and cartoons of talking germs. Some posters are meant for clinical or staff areas; most are meant for all areas of the facility. One, which is also available in Spanish and has been created in both small and large sizes and two designs, simply states: "Patients and Visitors: It's okay to ask health care providers if they have cleaned their hands."

The word multidisciplinary reflects the campaign approach. The campaign team is working through several disciplines in VA hospitals to get the messages out. Materials are being sent to seven key contacts in each facility—infection control professionals, patient safety officers, occupational health staff, prevention managers, public affairs officers, education contacts, and, through the latter group, patient educators. "This broad outreach is essential to getting the word out," says Mather. "Together these various professionals reach a wide range of people and we plan to give them tools and lots of encouragement to promote this important and potentially life-saving campaign."

The 60 printed posters have been distributed to facility contacts in the seven disciplines. Additional

sets in English or Spanish can be ordered by facility education contacts. All of the posters were also designed to be printed or downloaded from the Web and are a size and contrast that will work on office printers in color or black and white—yet an-

other way to extend the reach of the campaign. Be on the lookout for colorful posters at your facility this fall and above all: Clean your hands and cover your coughs! **VA**

By *Connie Raab*

How and When to Clean Your Hands

When your hands are not visibly soiled, alcohol-based hand rubs are the most effective way to clean them. A study cited by the CDC shows that these hand rubs can reduce more than 99 percent of bacteria on the hands. This is better than antimicrobial soap and much better than plain soap. And alcohol-based hand rubs are less drying to the skin than antimicrobial soap.

How do you clean your hands?

Using an alcohol-based hand rub (gel or foam), you:

- Apply to palm of one hand
- Rub hands together vigorously, covering all surfaces, until dry

Using antimicrobial soap, you:

- Wet hands with water
- Apply soap
- Rub hands together for at least 15 seconds
- Rinse and dry with disposable towel
- Use towel to turn off faucet

When should you clean your hands? Probably more often than you do now.

If you are in health care settings, use alcohol-based hand rubs* before and after touching patients or touching items in patients' rooms.

When your hands are visibly soiled, use antimicrobial soap.

Otherwise, when you are not in health care settings, use antimicrobial soap and water or alcohol-based hand rubs (the former if hands are visibly soiled):

- Before eating
- After using the restroom
- After coughing or sneezing
- After being near someone sick or someone coughing or sneezing
- After touching trash
- After touching pets

*Alcohol-based hand rubs do not kill certain infectious agents, including norovirus and the bacterium *Clostridium difficile*. If these two are a problem in your facility, use antimicrobial soap, plenty of water, and lots of hand rubbing. Your facility's infection control professional can advise you further.

