

Patients as hand-wash police? You're kidding, right?

By Dell Richards



Since I began working with the issue of hand-hygiene, I have become extremely conscious of whether people wash their hands—or not.

So much so, I recently asked a shopper at the food co-op who was pawing through strawberries trying to find just the right ones for her basket if she'd washed her hands. You can guess what happened. (She was not amused.)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently launched a campaign to get patients to ask doctors and nurses in hospitals to wash their hands. A campaign video currently is being played on closed circuit TV in patient rooms,

lobbies and ER waiting rooms. The video has the patient asking the healthcare professional to wash their hands, whether they already have washed them or not, so that the patient can witness it.

As a public relations professional, I have many issues with this approach to hand-washing compliance as a way of decreasing healthcare-associated infections. Not only is the idea of washing twice time-consuming, but the campaign could have the opposite effect.

Why would a healthcare professional wash up prior to seeing a patient only to wash again when the patient asks? They wouldn't. And if the patient doesn't ask, they might not wash at all.

In fact, the approach is completely backward in nearly every imaginable way.

Patients are in hospitals because they are unable to care for themselves. Because they give healthcare professionals the power of life and death over them, they are not in a position to order anyone order around, despite what the campaign suggests.

When I asked the shopper if she washed her hands, she got extremely offended, as you would expect. Admittedly, I was a stranger, not exactly an analogous situation. But as member-owners of this small food co-op, we tend to be very involved, making our voices heard on a very detailed level.

Nonetheless, offending a healthcare professional is exactly the opposite of what a patient wants.

Being cared for by someone you trust is part of the healing process. As such, placing the burden of monitoring hand-wash compliance on patients is counter-productive. Anyone who is that vulnerable should not be held responsible for the actions of others, even when it comes to their own safety.

If this idea were implemented, where would it stop?

Should the patient's advocate be a medical practitioner who quizzes the doctor's

knowledge of medicine? Should the patient demand to see a surgical procedure before he or she has one to be certain the doctor can prove he or she knows how to do it?

To set up an adversarial relationship is in no one's interest, especially not the hospital.

Do hospital administrators really want patients asking why hand-hygiene is such an important issue?

Once the doctor leaves the room, do executives really want nurses explaining that nearly two million people in the U.S. acquire healthcare-associated infections each year and more than 100,000 die of them annually?

I don't think so. Hospitals already have enough lawsuits without handing out ammunition.

As I talked to the strawberry "paw-er", it struck me that everyone groped the fruit. Even me. Touching the produce to make sure it's ripe is what you do. I only singled this woman out because her behavior was more egregious than usual.

Not surprisingly, a random survey of 277 physicians and nurses found that two-thirds of them had a negative response to the idea of patient involvement in hand-hygiene compliance, as presented by Yves Longtin, M.D., of Geneva University Hospital at the 50th Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy this past September.

The survey found that:

- Nearly half said they would feel humiliated if they had to admit to poor hand-hygiene.
- More than a third said they wouldn't wear badges encouraging patients to ask about the subject, and,
- Nearly a third said they wouldn't appreciate patient reminders.

Neither would I and neither did the other shopper.

Luckily, she worked with "special need" children and was intensely aware of the importance of hand-hygiene. She assured me that she had washed her hands. I left it at that. I did not ask her to prove it.

As someone who has experienced this campaign scenario firsthand—albeit in a different context—I can assure you that making the patient the "hand-wash police" is the worst possible response to this important issue.

And, when there are simple, effective, unobtrusive, unbiased ways to monitor hand-washing, it also is completely unnecessary. †

Dell Richards is the owner of Dell Richards Publicity, a Sacramento public relations firm that specializes in healthcare and healthcare-related issues. Dell Richards can be reached at (916) 455-4790 or dell@dellrichards.com.

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