



# Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative

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## Tackling the awkward conversation

“Wash your hands, please.”

Talk about an awkward social situation. It's well known that failure of hand hygiene can put patients at risk to acquire infections. Yet healthcare workers usually hesitate to call out hand hygiene lapses on the part of their colleagues. A goal of the Learning Line at the Veteran's Administration Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS\*) is to make hand hygiene a 100% habit for every healthcare interaction with patients.

### Surrounding the problem

Healthcare workers at all levels know that hand hygiene is important to reduce the spread of infection. Yet observational studies by the renowned Swiss infection control researcher, Didier Pittet, MD, show only a 10-30% compliance rate in practice.

How has the VAPHS Learning Line on 4 West begun to create a culture that reinforces hand hygiene as a habit?

“We're surrounding the problem,” says Ellesha Miller, the Perfecting Patient Care Team Leader at VAPHS. “We're thinking systematically about how to remove the barriers that keep workers from performing hand hygiene every time.”

### Keeping it simple: keeping it real

After reviewing observational data, the Chiefs of Staff and Surgery wrestled with the challenge of boosting hand hygiene. They concluded that policies needed to support the habits. Their new rule required

100% hand hygiene compliance upon entry and exit from a patient's room.

As all healthcare providers know, rules are one thing.

To support the rule, alcohol rub dispensers were installed at each patient's door. Alcohol rub is recommended by the CDC and may be superior to hand-washing in certain situations. The illustration at right shows a poster displayed prominently at the VAPHS. This key visual cue demonstrates to workers how well the alcohol rub works. The type used at the VA contains moisturizers, so it use helps eliminate skin dryness, while reducing the time required for hand hygiene.

**THE FIRST TIME A  
PATIENT REMINDS  
YOU TO WASH  
YOUR HANDS,  
YOU'LL NEVER  
FORGET IT.**

—PHYSICIAN

Ellesha Miller followed up with 4 West staffers

conducting continuing training about the risks and benefits of hand hygiene.

“We don't talk so much about policies,” says Miller, “but more about what you need to do to protect the patient. When you address the problem in real life, people get it much more quickly. We ask people to sanitize their hands on entry and exit of all rooms, to establish the habit.”

Similar, consistent rules were applied to gowning and gloving. To support the rules,

**Patients,**

You have a **RIGHT** to clean hands.

Please remind **EVERYONE** to  
sanitize or wash their hands when  
entering and exiting your room.

Reminding patients and workers that hand hygiene is a 100% requirement.

new supply procedures ensured that comfortable, properly fitting gloves and gowns were always available when and where needed, in the quantity needed. In one instance, a question came up about gowning: when entering a patient’s room for an encounter that would not require contact—such as saying, “Good Morning,” or asking a question—would it be necessary to gown?

To deal with this eventuality, the team taped off a one-foot-square floor area just inside the room. This unequivocal visual cue tells employees that they may enter but may not go past the line without gowning (see illustration).

**Scripting that awkward conversation**

“The traditional occupational hierarchy of a hospital creates discomfort for people who want to remind others about hand hygiene,” says Miller. “We’ve been able to create an environment in 4 West that is spreading throughout the hospital. A person’s job title no longer gets in the way of doing the right thing for patients. I have seen nurses reminding Chief Residents to sanitize their hands.”

How did they do it? Miller gave staff time and training to come up with a prepared script to use when they witnessed a lack of precaution compliance. Then Miller and others began using the script themselves, as a signal to others that it was safe—and expected—for them to do so.

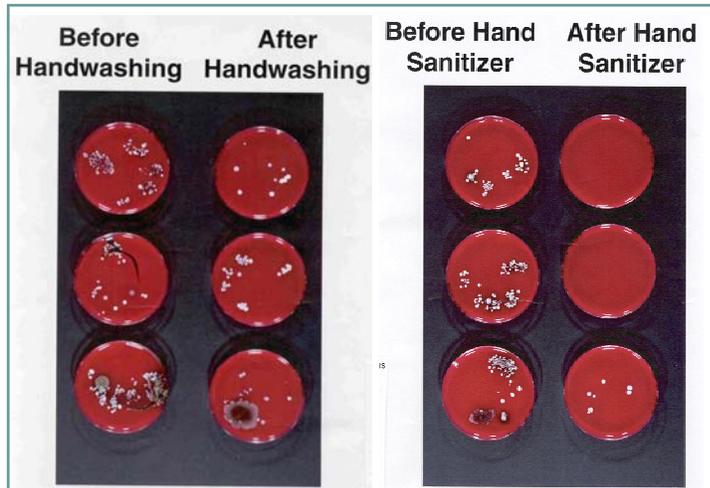
Creating what Miller calls a “global culture change” also involves the patients. Signs were designed by a team from patient care services, decorating, housekeeping and others to inform patients of their right to be treated with clean hands. Large, prominent signs urge patients to speak out if they have questions.

Miller recounts, “One doctor tells his students and co-workers about the time a patient stopped him. He says, ‘The first time a patient reminds you to wash your hands, you’ll never forget it.’

“If a neighbor runs a stop sign in your neighborhood, you’ll probably have a talk with him or her. Skipping hand hygiene is so very serious for patients that we want the same instinctual reaction when people see hand hygiene violations,” says Miller. “Nobody is out to assess blame, but to let everyone know what the hospital rules are. It’s each person’s responsibility to perform hand hygiene, and to encourage others to do likewise.”

**Preliminary results: encouraging**

Dr. Pittet’s research suggests that when hand hygiene compliance improves from just 50% to 75%, the rate of infection transmittal drops by half. Initial results at the VA, while not definitive, do show improvement. Various problems, from lack of gloves to lack of time, prevent well intentioned workers from doing the right thing. Addressing both the physical and psychological factors that cause workers to take hygiene short-cuts will protect both the healthcare worker and patient. ☞



Posters are installed in staff areas in 4 West show petri dishes created on-site from clinicians’ hands. The poster shows the superiority of hand sanitizers over hand washing alone.



Exactly where to gown? Visual cues at the VAPHS leave no doubt.

