

Cleaning and housekeeping workers: Critical to care

Hospital patients, nursing home residents and health care workers are extremely vulnerable to infection. Our recent experience with SARS has made this very clear.

To keep health care facilities safe, clean and sterile, cleaning and housekeeping workers need specialized knowledge and training. They also need experience and a great deal of dedication.

Careful attention to detail is essential to minimize the risk from exposure to sharps, chemicals and hazardous waste. Special cleaning procedures are required as they work around expensive medical equipment.

Hospital cleaners help protect and improve the health of patients by eliminating bacteria and preventing disease. As well, workers have regular contact with patients during the course of their duties, playing a crucial role in their care.

Public sector housekeeping and cleaning staff are a critical part of the health care team.

On the front line

Health care housekeeping and cleaning staff are the front line of defense against antibiotic-resistant 'superbugs', viruses, infections and other potentially life-threatening organisms.

Each area of a health care facility requires a different procedure and specialized skills:

Operating rooms must be sterile and immaculate. With a fifteen-minute turnaround time between patients, workers must be fast and efficient. Cleaning blood and body parts, including human tissue, bone chips and teeth, can be unpleasant and dangerous. Working around sensitive high-tech equipment requires special care.

In **dialysis units**, the risk of cross infection is high so sterility is crucial. Under constant pressure to speed patient turnover, 22 beds must be stripped and freshly made every hour.

In **emergency rooms**, stretchers and other surfaces are often covered with difficult-to-clean fluids like blood and vomit and must be cleaned quickly between patients.

In **radiation rooms**, workers must wear protective clothing. After cleaning, the room is monitored for radiation. If "hot spots" remain it must be cleaned again.

Cleaning and housekeeping workers require extensive training. Formal college-based programs exist, but most hospital cleaning skills are acquired on the job. Training is usually provided by nurses or by other health care professionals.

Cleaning and housekeeping workers provide direct patient care. Hospital cleaners spend a minimum of 20 minutes a day with patients. As a result, workers often become close to patients and their families, providing emotional support while ensuring their safety from bacteria and contamination.

Continuity is key

When qualified and well-trained support staff are not in place, patient care suffers. Other health care professionals, technical staff and families must work harder to fill in the gaps.

Not only does this affect the quality of care, it is a poor use of human resources at a time when hospitals are understaffed and have difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.

Low pay + poor working conditions = high turnover

In his 2000 hospital review, Scotland's auditor general found turnover among private cleaning contractors was almost twice as high (40 per cent) as among in-house cleaning staff. The report also found contracted-out cleaning provided less flexibility and lower quality service.

In Britain, the National Health Service was forced to invest more than CDN \$77 million in a crash program of hospital cleaning after an audit revealed that most of the hospitals relying on private contracts failed to meet national cleaning standards. In addition, contracting out has fragmented the health care team and created obstacles to integrated patient care.

Cutting corners kills

In Taipei, Taiwanese health officials have blamed privatization and the contracting out of nursing aides, cleaners and laundry workers for the spread of SARS.

In the US, where privatization of cleaning and housekeeping services is more widespread than Canada, a recent investigation found that cuts in cleaning and infection control standards contributed to 103,000 patient deaths in 2000.

The *Chicago Tribune* establishes a link between soaring infection rates and a 25 per cent cut in hospital housekeeping staff since 1995, combined with poor training and a high-turnover, low-wage workforce. The Tribune concludes that 75 per cent of these deadly infections were preventable.

The same study points to a US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention report that deaths linked to hospital germs are the fourth leading cause of death among Americans – behind heart disease, cancer and strokes.

In Australia, contracted-out cleaning has meant lower standards and higher infection rates. Experts warn of the dangers in handing control over cleaning to outside organizations, resulting in "uncoordinated and inconsistent" cleaning. Inflexible contracts make it hard to quickly alter cleaning standards to respond to new hazards, and hospitals are spending scarce time and money resolving disputes.

Keep it public

If cleaning and housekeeping jobs are contracted out to companies that hire unskilled workers at lower wages, the health of patients across Canada will deteriorate.

Privatizing cleaning and housekeeping services puts an essential part of our health system at risk.

Contracting out CUPE members' work undermines public health care.

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