

Take a hands off approach

The Healthcare Commission's investigation of outbreaks of Clostridium difficile at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust demonstrates the need to ensure there are enough nursing and cleaning resources to implement the necessary measures to contain transmission of the bacterium. Dart Valley says no-touch taps can help

Clostridium difficile has become another high profile HCAI causing concern. The report produced by the Healthcare Commission Investigating outbreaks of Clostridium difficile at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust is quite disturbing. It clearly demonstrates the need to ensure there are enough nursing and cleaning resources to implement the necessary measures to contain transmission of the bacterium.

Many Trusts currently do not have the optimum facilities, finances, staffing levels, and cleaning resources required to completely eradicate transmissions. Nevertheless, it should be the target.

Figures published by the Health Protection Agency earlier this year show there were 42,625 cases of Clostridium difficile infection in patients aged 65 years and above in England in the first three quarters of 2006. This represents an increase of 5.5 per cent over the same period in 2005, when there were 40,390 cases reported. While this is a smaller increase than seen previously, rates of infection remain high across England, particularly in small acute trusts, and the results show clearly the scope for improvement. With the emergence

of the 027 strain (which is significantly more toxic than other strains and is resistant to many antibiotics), there remains great cause for concern and serious measures are required to combat its spread.

It has been widely publicised that if C. difficile is in the gut, antibiotics can disrupt normal bowel flora and promote C. difficile overgrowth. This is an issue for medical experts to deal with, but containing and reducing the spread of the bacterium requires strict infection control practices to be implemented by all care workers.

An article by Cleveland Clinic

Journal of Medicine published on the CDC website provides some useful guidance: "Transmission of C. difficile occurs primarily in health care facilities via the fecal-oral route following transient contamination of the hands of health care workers and patients; contamination of the patient care environment also plays an important role."

"The most effective means of decreasing horizontal spread of C. difficile has been a combination of vigilant hand hygiene and use of isolation precautions."

"Alcohol is not effective in killing C. difficile spores. Therefore if a hospital is experiencing an outbreak, it is prudent for health care workers to wash their hands exclusively with soap and water when caring for patients with known CDAD."

The spores can survive in the environment for long periods. If cleaning is not effective healthcare workers can easily transmit the



bacterium from surfaces to an uninfected patient. Not all cleaning disinfectants kill the spores, the reference article that follows recommends using bleach.

If the hospital does not have sufficient isolation facilities then patients should be cohorted.

Hand hygiene is acknowledged as the single most important infection control measure yet compliance still generally remains below 50 per cent. The number and locations of clinical handwash basins is a very important factor in the quest to improve compliance in hospitals. C. difficile emphasises the importance of hand washing with liquid soap and water which remains a critical part of hand hygiene.

Hand hygiene protocols have always included washing hands with liquid soap and water following certain activities or if the hands are visibly soiled. Renewed awareness has encouraged many hospitals to retro-fit additional hand wash facilities.

Tap handles can be a source of transmission and even if healthcare workers are sufficiently dexterous to use arms, it is more hygienic not to touch a contaminated surface with arms or hands.

No-touch taps have many advantages over lever taps and, apart from avoiding the risk of contamination, the ease of use has also been shown to increase hand washing compliance.

For further info just call the number below or enquire online.

¹ www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/pdf/infDis/Cdiff_CCJM02_06.pdf

