Ten years on… are healthcare workers “bare below the elbows” when providing patient care?

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Background

Wearing of jewellery, nail coverings, a wrist watch or clothing below elbow length prevents healthcare workers from performing adequate hand hygiene 1, 2, 3. There is well-established evidence that this practice poses an infection control risk to patients and staff as it contributes to transmission of organisms in healthcare settings.

In 2009 Austin Health focused on clinical staff wearing minimal jewellery, no nail coverings, no wrist watch and no clothing below elbow length. This is termed being “bare below the elbows” (BBE) and is considered best practice according to Australian and International Infection Control Guidelines 1-2.

Aim

This quality improvement activity 4 aimed to assess current practices of clinical nursing staff in relation to being “bare below the elbows” (BBE).

Infection Control undertook this 2019 review as an adjunct to Hand Hygiene auditing that is currently conducted at Austin Health across all three campuses. Issues identified by this audit may help to guide targeted strategies to ensure nursing staff are minimising infection risks to both patients and themselves.

Method

Audits were conducted in 16 acute inpatient clinical areas plus the Emergency Department at Austin Health.

Nurses working on either a morning or afternoon shift, from each of the 17 areas, were audited on whether they were wearing stoned or multiple rings, bracelets, nail coverings, a wrist watch or long sleeves. The audit was carried out on a given day. Fifteen nurses were randomly selected from each clinical area and no prior warning was given.

The name of each clinical area was recorded to inform respective managers, but the identity of individual nurses was not documented.

Results

152 (59.6%) of 255 nurses audited were not bare below the elbows (non-BBE) [Figure 1]. 218 non-BBE elements were observed amongst the non-BBE nurses.

- 108 Wrist watches
- 57 Stoned or multiple rings
- 31 Nail coverings
- 15 Long sleeves
- 7 Bracelets

100 nurses (39.2%) had 1 non-BBE element. 52 nurses (20.4%) had 2 or more non-BBE elements.

Of the 15 nurses audited in each of the 17 clinical areas, the number of non-BBE nurses ranged from 2 to 13 (mean=9).

Discussion

Of the 255 nurses audited, 108 (42.4%) were wearing a wrist watch; 63 had this as their only non-BBE element. If wrist watches are excluded from the data set, the paired clinical area data predicts a significant improvement (p<0.01) [Figure 2]. The total number of non-BBE nurses then decreases from 152 (59.6%) to 89 (34.9%) [Figure 3].

Focusing attention on the importance of being BBE, and highlighting the issue of wrist watches, may also help to reduce other non-BBE elements.

Clinical area number 8 was markedly better than the other areas. Only 2 nurses were observed to have 1 non-BBE element each.

Further investigation into the reasons for compliance with BBE is needed to guide improvement strategies across Austin Health. Factors such as staff preference, availability of wall clocks to eliminate the need for wrist watches, and leadership of hospital policy need further exploration.

References


