Letters to the Editor

Handwashing Versus Gloving

To the Editor:

We commend Birnbaum et al (1990; 11(9) :465-472) for the excellent article describing various isolation strategies used in Canadian hospitals. Several references are made to the body substance isolation (BSI) system[1] that is described as a broad strategy of precautions to reduce nosocomial infection risks, both to patients and to healthcare workers. The article also attributes the BSI system with using "gloves as an alternative to handwashing," both as a policy recommendation and an infection control strategy. In our view, handwashing and gloving are not equivalent and cannot really be considered alternatives.

For patient protection, when healthcare workers put on clean gloves just before contact with mucous membranes and nonintact skin, they reduce the likelihood of transferring organisms from their hands to the patient.[2,3] An added benefit is the barrier between the patient and the healthcare worker that may reduce the risk of healthcare worker infection with a variety of agents, such as herpes simplex from oral secretions.

When healthcare workers' hands are soiled with moist body substances, handwashing removes the soil (or most of it) but does not offer as much protection to the healthcare worker as does the physical barrier of gloves. Gloves provide a physical barrier between the healthcare worker's hands and whatever the hands contact; however, nothing except handwashing cleans hands if they are soiled. These are clearly two different issues.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that healthcare workers do not wash their hands adequately. The appropriate use of gloves does not change this behavior. In our article in *Annals* of *Internal Medicine,*[1] *we* stated that "...gloves are worn for contact with mucous membranes, nonintact skin, and moist body substances...Correspondingly, handwashing is required less frequently." If gloves are worn, hands are less likely to be soiled, and the impact of unwashed hands is thus reduced. As one of the speakers at the Third International Conference on Nosocomial Infections (1990) so succinctly pointed out, 'When the choice is between a device or behavior change...go for the device." Undoubtedly, gloves as a device are superior to poor handwashing. In many cases, gloves are superior to good handwashing, but in all cases, gloves are superior to no handwashing-the current state of affairs in most hospitals.

Patricia Lynch, RN, MBA, CIC
M. Jeanne Cummings, RN, BSN, CIC
Walter E. Stamm, MD
Marguerite M. Jackson, RN, MS, CIC
Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, Washington
University of California, San Diego, California

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The authors were asked to respond to this letter.

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