

Paper towel producers lead hygiene debate

The issue of good hygiene rose to the top of the news agenda in 2009, as growing concern about H1N1 flu led to greater interest in the measures and practices that can prevent it from spreading.

The past year has also seen evidence mount up that when it comes to drying your hands in a washroom, there is no more hygienic system than a paper hand towel. A comprehensive study by the University of Westminster, which was commissioned by the ETS, European trade association of paper tissue producers, demonstrated that the highest hygiene standards are offered by paper hand towels. This good performance are mainly due to the friction exerted by and the absorbing qualities of paper tissue.

Furthermore, the study also showed that a new type jet air dryer can blow bacteria from someone's hands to a distance of up to 2 metres away – potentially covering other washroom users in germs, which might include H1N1.

When the tissue producers commissioned the study, they did not know that swine flu would strike in such a devastating way. However, both H1N1 and the research are very closely connected. The fact that one hand drying method reduces bacteria while other methods result in spreading bacteria, clearly demonstrates that the method people use to dry their hands could impact on how easily or fast viruses spread in the community. The tissue producers brought the message to this year's ISSA InterClean in Amsterdam, using traffic lights to demonstrate their baseline "Go Green for Hygiene".

This study was not isolated. Several in the past 10 years or so have come to the same conclusion – paper towels are by far the most hygienic method of hand drying available. Hence it is vital that all alike understand that good hand drying hygiene practices can help prevent the spread of bacteria.

One criticism commonly voiced at hand towels is that while they may be hygienic, they are not as environmentally friendly as other methods of hand drying. However, this fails to take account of the enormous strides that have been made by the paper towel manufacturing industry in the area of sustainability and tackling waste.

Moreover, besides all the hygiene benefits offered by paper hand towels, research has also shown they are also the preferred method of hand drying for a majority of consumers. An independent survey in four European countries, also commissioned by the ETS, found that 96% of consumers considered paper towels to be the most hygienic form of hand drying. And yet despite this, many organisations still do not offer paper towels in their public washrooms.

Good hand hygiene is vital at all times.

On its website (www.europeantissue.com) ETS points out that many global and national institutions (such as the World Health Organisation/WHO) offer authoritative advice on hand hygiene. This initiative reflects the mission that ETS has set for themselves to spread the message that there is no safer or more hygienic drying system than the paper towel.

For more information: www.europeantissue.com



Photo courtesy of Rubbermaid

care cleaning is the CK Group which offers tailor-made training programmes for domestic or infection control staff. The company has introduced a reporting system that helps to track ward cleaning regimes.

"Beds and other equipment are frequently moved from ward to ward and unless these are tracked, they could be missed from a cleaning cycle," said managing director Ian Pether. "We tag these items with either a barcode or a physical tag and then load the information on to a computer."

According to Pether it is the job of the infection control department to join up the dots and take ultimate responsibility for cleaning. But he agrees there are several grey areas regarding who is responsible for which healthcare cleaning task. "Although nurses tend to be responsible for cleaning patient equipment they don't always see it as their job - they feel it is the responsibility of the cleaners," he said. "And the fact that each hospital trust has a different policy complicates the matter."

Confusing for domestic staff

"Sometimes the nurse is responsible for cleaning the whole bed, for example, while sometimes they just clean the mattress and the cleaning staff clean the frame. It is very confusing for the domestic staff, especially if they move from one trust to another only to discover they are not doing the right job."

Pether feels that the key to improved healthcare cleaning lies in placing a higher value on the role of the cleaning staff. "A cleaner has just as much responsibility for saving someone's life as a doctor or a nurse since they help to control the rate of infections," he said. "We are paying them a minimum wage but we expect them to do a spectacular job - it just doesn't add up."

Rollins agrees with this view and adds that there is a need to invest more heavily in staff training. "Our cleaning staff should be valued as competent technicians who have a vital role in protecting our patients," he said. "But we pay them very poorly which means they disappear as soon as they are offered a better job."

"There is a generally-held prejudice that cleaning staff are just numbers and not intelligent people, but there are a lot of passionate people out there who do their job because they care."