

Attitudes Toward Hand Hygiene Among Medical Students on Placement in Primary Care

L.G. Glynn^{1,2}, R. Cosgrove¹, R. Halls¹, M. Casey^{1,2}, C.P. Dunne^{1,2,3}

1. School of Medicine, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland.
2. Health Research Institute, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland.
3. Centre for Interventions in Infection, Inflammation & Immunity (4i), University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland.

Dear Editor,

Many studies outline the beneficial role that effective hand hygiene has in preventing healthcare acquired infections in clinical settings^{1,2}. Healthcare workers and the general public have become increasingly aware of the importance of hand hygiene since the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in December 2019. There is a paucity of research on this topic in primary care where approximately 90% of health contacts occur.

We have conducted the first study to determine the attitudes and knowledge of medical students towards hand hygiene in primary care in Ireland. This study was carried out prior to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. A 37-question on-line survey was circulated to all year three medical students in the University of Limerick School of Medicine examining attitudes and knowledge towards hand hygiene. Out of a total of 138 students, 64 students responded (46%). Overall, the students surveyed had awareness of the evidence base, relevance and benefits of hand hygiene.

Attitudes towards hand hygiene were predominately positive with 72% (n=46) of students claiming hand hygiene is important in their area of practice and 86% (n=55) agreeing that hand hygiene policy is relevant to their work. The study found that the majority (83%, n=53) of medical students were compliant with current recommendations on hand hygiene. In spite of positive attitudes, over a quarter (27%, n=17) of students had not implemented the recommendations of their practices' hand hygiene policy. In addition, although the survey response shows students are compliant with hand hygiene in certain settings, over 50% of medical students are not familiar with the National SARI guidelines for hand hygiene.

Alcohol based hand rub was viewed as a practical and accessible method of performing hand hygiene. Students expressed uncertainty in regard to the expectations of GP tutors around hand hygiene. The role of GP tutors in hand hygiene practices was not well defined and there may be a need for further training in hand hygiene for medical students prior to primary care placement. This study provides insight into hand hygiene practices among medical students in primary care placement in Ireland.

In essence, students placed in primary care have positive attitudes towards hand hygiene. They are open to change and willing to incorporate change into their clinical practice in relation to hand hygiene on placement. However, it appears some students perceived low expectations in terms of hand hygiene in primary care, so the integration of primary care physicians into hand hygiene training may be beneficial. Overall, the results of this study, consistent with previous studies, suggest the need for further training of medical students regarding optimal hand hygiene practices^{3,4}.

Gaining an insight into the attitudes of medical students towards hand hygiene is vital as they will become the future of healthcare and play a vital role in preventing the spread of infection. We plan to repeat this survey with medical students to explore differences that may have emerged as a result of the experience of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

Keywords:

Alcohol-based hand rub, Attitudes, Hand hygiene, Hand rubbing, Infection prevention and control, Medical students

Ethical approval and consent to participate:

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences (Reference number 2014_12_04_EHS).

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Corresponding Author:

Liam G. Glynn,
School of Medicine,
University of Limerick,
Limerick,
Ireland
Email: liam.glynn@ul.ie

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