

COVID-19: a time to focus on nurses, hand hygiene and infection prevention and control

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Abstract

With the global concern of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19), infection prevention and control (IPC) is increasingly perceived as a major contributor to achieve a highly effective response to the outbreak and to prevent or limit transmission in healthcare settings. Improving health results is highly reliant on well-trained nurses especially during unexpected infectious disease outbreaks. The World Health Organization (WHO) promotes hand hygiene, which is the cornerstone of infection prevention, through its annual global campaign on 5 May every year. The 2020 campaign targets nurses and midwives with the overall theme “Nurses and Midwives: CLEAN CARE is in YOUR HANDS”.

Keywords: COVID-19, infection prevention and control, hand hygiene, nurses, World Health Organization

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Following the outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, infection prevention and control (IPC) strategies to prevent or limit disease transmission in healthcare settings have become of utmost importance.^{1,2} Nurses are the healthcare workers (HCWs) with the most patient contact in the fight against the virus, and their adherence to IPC practices is crucial for fighting the epidemic.³ Since COVID-19 spreads from one person to another similarly to influenza and other respiratory viruses, it is thus recommended to clean hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water, cover the nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing, and avoid close contact with those who have fever and cough.³ Both HCWs and the public must be aware of IPC principles in order to be prepared for infectious disease outbreaks.⁴ Hand hygiene with an alcohol-based hand rub is well-known as one of the most important procedures to prevent disease transmission in health-care facilities in general, and in particular for preventing COVID-19 cross-transmission.^{2,5} Although hand hygiene seems like a very simple measure, compliance rates are still worrisome, even with regular global campaigns to improve this behavior.⁶

Nurses are constantly exposed to the virus and this, coupled with long working hours and an often stressful work environment, puts them at an increased risk for acquiring COVID-19 as well as becoming a source of transmission to others.^{3,7} The increasing number of infected HCWs during this epidemic⁸ highlights the necessity of compliance with the World Health Organization (WHO) multimodal hand hygiene improvement strategy to support HCWs in improving hand hygiene at their facilities, especially in developing countries where compliance rates are generally lower.^{5,9} Moreover, the growing rate of nosocomial transmission of COVID-19 underlines the importance of the implementation of IPC core components in all healthcare facilities around the world, including outpatient care and primary care.² Most healthcare-acquired infections are preventable, and associated with HCWs' hand hygiene.^{10,11}

A sufficient number of well-trained and prepared HCWs is necessary to provide optimal healthcare, especially during unexpected infectious disease outbreaks.¹² Nurses play a major role in the infection

control and disease surveillance that is essential to manage epidemics.¹³ According to the WHO, there is a global shortage of nurses which is considered a threat to achieve universal health coverage.¹⁴ Nurses' work overload and fatigue during outbreaks are recognized as a risk factor for healthcare-associated infections.^{4,15} During infection outbreaks, it is very important to provide a safe work environment that requires adequate nurse staffing levels, availability of high-quality protective equipment, and effective communication to ensure both safety and quality of care.⁴

The WHO declared 2020 the Year of the Nurse and the Midwife. It is crucial, especially in times of outbreaks or other major global health challenges, to make sure we remember and honor the work and responsibility performed by this often underappreciated group of HCWs. Please join us in recognizing their role in providing and improving health services. "Nurses and Midwives: CLEAN CARE is in YOUR HANDS"!

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